

Now 35 Years of University Presence in Europe: Fading Hopes for Renewal? A Conversation with Jousch Barblan

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INTRODUCTION

Crisis or Renewal?

In August 2005, Jousch Andris Barblan, former Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory on the Universities' Fundamental Values and Rights, located in Bologna, Italy, and also former Secretary General of the Association of European Universities, offered a set of provocations on the role and purpose of universities in contemporary societies. Entitled “25 years of university presence in Europe: Crisis or renewal?”, Barblan (2005) began his talk by reflecting on the celebration in 1988 of the University of Bologna—long lauded as the *Alma Mater Universitatum*—though, of course, institutions of higher learning also predated this European icon.

However, the deeper purpose of this reflection was not for Barblan (2005) to offer a congratulatory gesture on the capacity of the University of Bologna to endure over the *long duree*, though that in itself is noteworthy. Rather, it was to link the foundation of the University to another event; the drafting and signing of the Magna Charta which had used this

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auspicious occasion to restate a claim, and thus reclaim, the role and purpose of the university as a foundational building block, and pillar, of a modern democratic European society. The university would be charged with the renewal of Europe through developing a common set of values and shared culture.

The European university, Barblan (2005) argued, could be understood through four functions that drew on the deep and diverse history of Europe: these were the quest for *meaning*, *order*, *welfare* and *truth*. By *meaning*, he meant the kind of scholarship championed by Thomas Aquinas; the capacity to make sense of society by bringing diverse traditions of knowledge creation together to shed some light on society. By *order*, Barblan invoked the social development, or ‘education’, of the individual and wider community championed by Ireland’s John Henry Newman. The *welfare* function of the university invoked the memory of France’s Napoleonic era where the university contributed to industrial and military development. And, finally, in referring to the *truth* function of the university, Barblan was referring to the tradition of scientific investigation synonymous with von Humboldt; and, whilst he acknowledged that different universities, at different times, might privilege one or more of these functions above others, in the main these functions—on balance—served the needs of the wider society.

Fraying Edges

Yet, in arguing for an ongoing dialogue as to how to secure the future of the ‘true university’, it is clear Barblan (2005) is fully aware of the fraying of the edges, and blurring of the boundaries, around the contemporary university in Europe. For, in fact, neoliberal policies in many countries—especially in some of the heartlands of Europe—had begun to take their toll on the higher education sector more generally from the 1990s onwards (Scott 2000). The ‘elite’ nature of university student intake was being challenged, though not—it would seem—with any higher-minded purpose. Rather, universities were being asked to open their doors to a wider group of students in order to develop learning societies, and to revise and refine their missions in ways that aligned their purposes more closely to the development of globally competitive knowledge-based economies (Marginson 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1996).

However, in 2005, the spectre of an alternative, socially reinvigorated, European university—emerging from the heady days of the celebrated Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 in Paris, and its later endorsement in the Bologna Process by no less than 29 countries in 1999—was still entertained as a possible counter to the neoliberal juggernaut that had begun to steamroll its way through the corridors of the academy in a growing number of European countries. Could Allegre’s proposal for what Barblan (2005) argued was a civil society driven reform of European universities take hold and, in doing so, hold the line on the unravelling of what it meant to talk about the ‘true’ university? Might this experiment in regional democracy inject that necessary ballast into this imagined European higher education space that enabled this experiment in possibility to recalibrate a pervasive ‘listing’ towards competitiveness and economic instrumentalism? Barblan’s hope is that this was possible. But he was also clear that this would require an ongoing conversation between those in the academy and beyond as to how to hold on to the values promised by the Magna Charta in the face of major changes in the social contract, and the purposes of the university. In the epilogue to her book on the making of the European university area, Anne Corbett (2005) was equally ambivalent about the path ahead; she noted:

The European higher education area may be set to transform the European states’ higher education institutions as fundamentally as the nation state changed the medieval universities. Among their concerns is that it is not clear who shapes the process and it is not clear what the process is: will universities continue to be seen as a public good or will their prime characteristic be their contribution to Europe’s competitiveness? (p. 192)

We are now ten years on from that Magna Charta speech in Ankara, Turkey, and we might now ask whether Barblan’s (2005) reading of the challenges facing universities, and his call for a new compass to chart the waters ahead, was simply a matter of ill-judged futurism. I think not. Or are Barblan’s worries about a more gloomy set of possibilities now more of a reality than they appeared in Barblan 2005? I think so. In the rest of my intervention, I want to reflect on the nature of these challenges and changes, and return to Barblan’s plea for an urgent conversation that links these changes to wider questions about the kind of society that we want.

The Fading of Renewal

From the vantage point of 2015, I am continually struck by how much has changed over the past decade. Both the character of the university, as well as the spaces and places in which university life takes place, have altered. And so, too, has the meaning of the category, university, and its mission in contemporary Europe.

In my own reading of developments in Europe, already in 2005 the tide had begun to turn in Europe as the balance of social forces moved to the right (Robertson 2008). The more left-leaning intellectuals who had advised on the 2000 Lisbon Agenda—that Europe should include social cohesion and jobs with competition and economic development—were now replaced by those who advanced a more hardened, neoliberal agenda. One month after Barblan (2005) had made his August speech, the European Commissioner, President Juan Manuel Barroso, delivered a rousing speech to the European Ideas Network in Lisbon titled “Building a More Open Europe”. Its urgent tone is evident:

Today’s challenge is globalization. Change, technological and societal, takes place at a breath-taking speed. The question is whether to resist this change, or rather to manage it. In order to be able to protect and promote freedom, security and prosperity, to deliver on the expectations of our citizens, we need to reap not forgo the benefits of globalization. We must engage and shape it in accordance with our values and principles. That means Europe must open up. It must open up internally, in relations between Member States and between its institutions and its citizens. It must open up even more to the world, during this period of rapid change. ...Why this urgency? I have just come back from China and India, and what I saw was a vivid demonstration of the sheer speed and scale of the changes going on in the world So, let’s hold onto this fact. That the drivers of globalisation are human beings, and the winners from globalisation are human beings. Globalisation is being led by all of us, by the choices we make. It is driven by the imagination and creativity of millions of people, through technological innovation and scientific progress. (Barroso 2005a, p. 5)

Barroso goes on to offer his audience frank advice about how to respond to the challenges of Europe; that the Lisbon strategy must be revised to focus more specifically on innovation, investment and jobs (Barroso 2005a). However, his concern was not just with an increasingly evident geostrategic shift in world power; rather, it was also with poor economic growth in Europe. In the Mid-Term Review of the 2000 Lisbon Agenda,

the Chair Wim Kok (2004) had delivered a report that described Europe as weighed down by an overloaded agenda, poor coordination, conflicting priorities and, above all, a lack of political will which, in turn, had widened the growth gap between North America and Asia (p. 5).

These broader developments were to have important consequences for universities across Europe—whose task it was to help deliver a competitive knowledge economy. The Bologna Process, already under way to develop a European Higher Education Area, was strategically enrolled in the project of renovating universities sufficiently to take on this project. Describing the state of education in Europe as nothing short of miserable, Barosso (2005b) invoked the well-known line from Shakespeare’s Hamlet and argued that there was “something is rotten in the state of Europe’s research and education” (p. 5). But Barosso’s intervention also meant something more than simply a rhetorical intervention. The invoking of crisis and danger had opened up a political opportunity for the European Commission to assert its leadership over the governing of universities in Europe—in turn, placing limits on the autonomy of universities that the Magna Charta had so determinedly claimed.

Other claims to seeing the future, assert leadership over the governing of higher sector, or strategic investments by for-profit corporations have generated major challenges to, and changes in, European higher education. In 2013, together with Katelyn Donnelly and Saad Rizvi, Sir Michael Barber—former advisor to UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and now Director of Education operations for the largest education corporation in the world launched the report *An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead* (Barber et al. 2013). They confidently pronounced that; “the models of higher education that marched triumphantly around the globe in the second half of the twentieth century are broken... The traditional multi-purpose university with a range of degrees and a modestly effective research programme has had its day. The next 50 years could see a golden age for higher education but only if all the players in the system, from students to governments, seize the initiative and act ambitiously” (Barber et al. 2013, p. 1). In 2013, this apocalyptic thinking went viral.

Barber et al. (2013), of course, were keen to invoke the threat of the emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs), in 2008 and more visibly in 2012, as being a major challenge to the traditional university. These online courses—open to eager learners all over the world—have attracted considerable interest, especially in a cash-strapped post-2008

environment. Prestigious United States universities such as Harvard (exX), Stanford (Coursera) and MIT (MITx) have all lent support to budding entrepreneurial faculties as they experiment with different models of learning and accreditation. Not to be outdone, Europe, too, has joined the rush—with initiatives being launched across a number of member states, whilst OpenupEd is funded by the European Commission. Paradoxically enough, MOOCs have tended to be attractive to the already well-educated—making an unexpected contribution to the notion that learning should take place over a lifetime. And, whilst this kind of initiative is difficult to think about in relation to the idea of a ‘true’ university, as envisaged by the Magna Charta, it does at least make a contribution to the wider social development function of higher education.

But one of the functions that Barblan (2005) might have foreshadowed, but did not, was the transformation of the higher education sector into a services sector making direct contributions to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), on the one hand, and, on the other, a line of revenue generation for venture capitalists and corporations seeking opportunities for investment in the higher education sector. Countries such as Australia have been trend-setters in promoting trade in education services—with education now the fourth largest GDP income earner of goods and services. Within Europe, the UK is particularly dependent on revenues from fee-paying international students, whilst education services are calculated to contribute £73 billion, or 2.8 % of GDP in 2014—up from 2.3 % in 2007 (Universities UK, Universities 2013). This kind of development is being promoted across Europe—eager to open up new higher education markets with “destination Europe”. Old colonial footprints are mobilised to oil the wheels of this emerging market, whilst new initiatives are funded by the European Commission (including tools such as Tuning that bring in a competency-based curriculum) to ensure that new supply chains can be established in competition with the USA (Gonzalez and Wagenaar 2005).

Across Europe, the mix of students on campus has changed dramatically, with international students making up a larger and larger percentage than at any time in the history of the modern European university. Year-on-year growth recorded by agencies, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) *Education at a Glance* (OECD 2014a), shows that the number of students enrolled in higher education outside their country of citizenship has more than doubled since 2000: from 2.1 million in 2000 to 4.5 million in 2012. All signs are that this figure will continue upwards, though the distribution

of students across different countries might well alter. Within the OECD area, the EU21 countries host the largest proportion (39 %) of foreign students (OECD 2014a, p. 344). Furthermore, these EU21 countries also enrol a very large number of students who come from another EU21 country. These developments, of course, add both cultural and linguistic diversity to the university. However, this diversity, paradoxically, has tended to result in less variety rather than more, as teaching in English has tended to be a pragmatic response to pressures to increase international student enrolment. And these pressures are not simply a question of the revenue streams that at least full-fee-paying international students might create. Rather, the rise and rise of global rankings, whose measures include percentage of international students, have resulted in a new set of game rules around the right profile to score well (Hazelkorn 2011).

The invocation to universities to be entrepreneurial has also been grasped by savvy investors who have developed a range of business models that are proving to be particularly lucrative. Laureate Education is simply one of a growing number of examples. Laureate is a for-profit higher education provider backed by private equity investors. It circles around ailing universities and buys a controlling share—in turn, putting into place a management system and slimmed-down offering that enables it to generate profits. In 2015, Laureate had interests in 24 institutions across eight European countries (Robertson and Komljenovic 2015); its academic staff does not have permanent contracts and it does not support research activity. With austerity measures biting deep into public funds, these initiatives are likely to gain even further traction—in turn, transforming the idea of the university and its contribution to the public good. But, most importantly, it directly challenges the core idea at the heart of the Magna Charta for, whilst the institution is autonomous in its governance, it is the servant to the market and profits, and not to the ideals of truth, meaning or, indeed, welfare, as it does not invest in research for the purposes of innovation and development.

It is commonplace to assert that institutions move at glacial pace and, at one level, this is true. But some glaciers do melt more rapidly than is desirable, when the wider conditions play havoc with the patterns of nature. In the UK, the changes afoot are like a racing torrent of water. In pressing for a competitive market in higher education, the government has ignored calls for a more measured approach—instead, putting into place a very high student fee; removed the block teaching grant to the social sciences and humanities; and enabled the for-profit providers to access state-backed student loans (Robertson 2013).

Barblan (2005) was right to be gloomy in 2005 as he surveyed the potential crisis facing European higher education. The rapid changes that are taking place in higher education in Europe are cause for concern, largely as the recalibration of the functions for the university are distinctly out of tune with the needs of a society that depends more than ever on a deep, diverse and rich knowledge base to secure its future. And, as political philosopher Wendy Brown (2011) noted, the essential conditions of democratic existence of “institutions and practices of equal opportunity, limited extremes of concentrated wealth and poverty; orientation toward citizenship as a practice of considering the public good, and citizens modestly discerning about the ways of power, history, representation and justice ... These same elements of democracy are at the heart of crises besetting public universities” (Brown 2011, p. 21).

The long shadow of neoliberalism has had devastating effects on the university as a public institution, and on the creation of knowledge for the public good. Barosso’s assertion, that something was rotten in European higher education and research might very well be traced to those who so eagerly embraced the market and competitiveness as the solution to the reform of higher education. Instead of renewal in ways that nurtured the conditions for European democracy, it has unleashed on itself a more devastating outcome—the emptying out of the conditions for democracy. Much needs to be done to chart a different course—and perhaps the flickers of hope are there: the Occupy movement; the growing anxiety, even by some of the international agencies, that things have gone too far and that we need to reconsider the nature of our institutions (OECD 2014b); or that the excessive concentration of wealth in a tiny percentage (Piketty 2014) is a step too far. But turning back tides takes courage, imagination, reflexiveness and considerable political work—work that can and should be done by a society involving all of its citizens, as they contribute to making *their* future. Regarding this, Barblan (2005) was right.

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