

Past, present, and future of Universities

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Heller voices her pessimistic view on the decline of the university system worldwide. Starting from the definition of the term “Bildung” by Hegel, she gives a brief outline of the history of higher education through the centuries, and shows how class divisions are still an important factor in modern universities. The ever-increasing role of bureaucracy has also a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning, undermining creativity and the development of talents.

In one section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* the common German word *Bildung* appears in a very specific interpretation. Hegel ascribes *Bildung* to a transitory period between a period termed by him “alienation” and the period of enlightenment. There the externalization, objectification of the persons is still the case, yet they are already preparing enlightenment as its condition. The tendency characterized in Hegel’s philosophy as *Bildung* is addressed by the historical sociology of Norbert Elias as “the civilizing process”. He tells the story as follows. Roughly until the Renaissance the aristocracy, and also the minor nobility lived amidst of and according to the rules of their estates. Those rules encompassed beliefs, consciousness, knowledge, ethics, dressing code, language use, norms of reciprocity and much else, that is a way of life. This way of life, divided the upper estates from all the lower ones, be their members rich or poor. Those who crossed the border of estates became ridiculous, like in the comedies by Moliere. As the caste of burghers gained strength, their needs for establishing their own norms, rules, codes, that is forms of life, gained momentum.

To put it shortly, *Bildung* was the name of the process through which a specific bourgeois form of life has been established. Hegel mentioned two kinds of *Bildung*. One being theoretical, the other pragmatic. The first creates and establishes the norms of social behavior, the ethical concepts, norms of tastes, judgments, modes of communication, the second establishes the codes of honor in practicing one’s vocation. The good burgher has a vocation, different burghers different ones, everyone should perform their own work honestly.

From the end of the 18th century, European gymnasiums and universities were supposed to fulfill the double task of *Bildung*. They became essential for the establishment of a double (a bourgeois and a national) identity combined with good scientific training in the then developing nation states. In the already modern countries, which were born prior to nation states, such as the United States, there were no universities until the mid 19th century. In Europe, philosophy stepped in the shoes of theology. In Berlin, Hegel told his students at the last class of his lectures in

the history of philosophy, that the standpoint of the individual is seizing the substantial spirit. His closing words were “I wish you live a good life” (Ich wünsche ihnen recht wohl zu leben)

To sum up: the task of the universities was, at least on the European continent, to form a new bourgeois elite that would serve simultaneously as a cultural elite. Ranks inherited at birth were replaced by social classes, and the wealthy parents, even if uneducated, wanted their sons to be well educated. Whereas in the United States “eggheads” did not enjoy great prestige, they did so in Europe. Not all diplomas had the same worth, but political leadership required one, preferably of certain important faculties such as law.

Class societies were slowly transformed into mass societies. The transformation started after WW1, became rapid after WW2, and terminated in and after 1968. The forms of life of the burgher were shaken, the so-called civilizing process stopped or rather reversed. It would be unheard of to close a university course with the words of Hegel. The task of universities in mass societies is no more to prepare students for living a decent, good life.

Due to the transformation of societies (at least on the European continent) the social mission of universities assumes a paradoxical form.

Modern society in general differs from all pre-modern societies, insofar as it is not the place occupied in the social hierarchy by the time of or place of birth which will determine roughly the function the person will perform throughout his life. Just the contrary is the case. The function a person performs will determine his place in the social hierarchy. Thus modern society is a functional society.

Class societies, where *Bildung* played an eminent role, were transitory, while mass society, the outcome of class societies, becomes, finally, entirely functional.

The entirely functional mass society could, however not entirely eliminate the characteristic of pre-modern societies based on stratification. Up to a degree, the accident of birth if it does not determine yet at least still conditions the main functions men and women will perform later on in life. Still, modernity, class society at first, and then mass society changed the logic of stratified societies, by reversing the connection between birthplace and function. Namely, they inserted education between the time and place of birth and the establishment of one's place in the social hierarchy by performing a function. Birth is no more destiny. How many classes attends a child, where and when, whether he/she will gain a place in an institution of tertiary education and in which one, will matter as much as the accident of birth. At first, in bourgeois class society to attend primary school became obligatory for lower classes, in view of disciplining the children of the poor, shaping them to become raw material in factories, whereas children of higher classes were still taught by private tutors..To discipline meant to punish, to beat up the arrogant, disobedient children, and not just lower class children. One step higher, “burgher” schools were established for the lower middle class and for all the girls, whereas gymnasium served the upper middle class and the upper class boys.

The dominant status of natural sciences was not immediately incorporated in the school system, but soon so called “real” classes appeared beside the so called “human” ones. Without high school certificate, no one could enroll in any university. We know, however, that the mediation via educational institutions cannot entirely outbalance the accident of birth. Not even in the present day. For example, the program launched by President Bush “No child left behind” failed. All the earlier and subsequent school reforms failed, and there were many.

Modern educational institutions were always teaching to be good at performing certain functions. Contrary to the times of class societies, nowadays, in our mass societies, this remained almost the sole task of educational institutions. The higher level institutions, especially elite universities, teach how to perform the better paid functions.

One aspect of *Bildung*, mentioned by Hegel, the preparation of students for a better, more dignified life, became outdated, and rightly so. In mass societies ways of life diverge, and no educational institution can superimpose on all the students the same form of life as the only dignified one. Forms of life are now open for choice, at least in principle, except in dictatorships.

Still, institutions of education in liberal democracies can contribute to the *Bildung* of good citizens. Several American universities do it, but the tradition of European universities does not further educate students to become citizens..

Another aspect of the Hegelian *Bildung*, the acquisition of the cultural tradition, literature, philosophy included, is still preserved in some elite universities, but not in others.

It seems paradoxical defend the idea of democracy on the one hand and suggest at the same time the *Bildung* of a cultural elite . Those who occupy the higher levels in the social hierarchy of the financial or political spheres claim the role of the elite even without any knowledge of the cultural tradition, art, literature, history. Democracy needs a cultural elite, which cannot be located in a precise place of the social hierarchy, being characterized, again, by the function it performs, namely the general function of social and cultural criticism. The function of meaning, rendering, interpreting, asking questions, doubting. This (the contradiction between the principle of democracy, and the need for a cultural elite in democracy) is a paradox one has to live with.

Mass society produces mass universities. This leads to further paradoxes. Modern functional society is based on the idea of equal opportunity. Although in fact there is no equal opportunity the idea itself is a constitutive factor of modern society. One has to presuppose that everyone who wants to study in the institutions of higher learning should have the opportunity to do so. At the same time, another constitutive factor of modernity is the developmental logic of science and technology. This is the only sphere where one can legitimately speak of progress, namely the accumulation of knowledge: both in terms of know what and of know how.

In mass universities, however, the level of teaching and the quality of accumulative knowledge equals in the average roughly to the quality and level of knowledge

accumulated a half century ago in a gymnasium. In many universities and in the majority of colleges one knows less at 24 than our fathers at 18.

Equal opportunity or first class education? This paradox, as it happens with paradoxes in general, can also not be solved. One has to give preference to one or the other “factor” or “thesis” of the paradox. One can establish, for example, a hierarchical order between institutions of higher education, some for mass education, some for high level education, some mass universities, some select-elite universities.

The way to select can be entry examination or tuition fees, or both. Neither of them is without problems.

As far as entry examinations go, they seem objective, yet they are entirely subjective. The usual tests favor the average, not the best, they punish the marginal and the intellectually curious. Jacques Derrida, for example, failed twice at the entry examination of the *École Normale*. In addition, lately even political correctness transformed the character of entry examinations from bad to worse. Tuition fees, on the other hand, discriminate against the poor. Both hurt the principle of equal opportunity even without success in furthering the education of those who might in the future play a role in the further development of sciences and technology.

In America, for example, tuition fees are constantly increasing in the most frequented universities, and not just in private ones. Whereas in community colleges, where tuition is free, students can hardly write or read. In some European states tuition is getting also more and more expensive. As a result, upwards mobility, so important for the functioning of modern societies, constantly diminishes and in some places it even stops. That is the learned people reproduce their stratum in their children.

Three other tendencies characterize more and more modern education, and especially tertiary education. First, the loss of authority of learning, second a special school certificate as the entry ticket of most positions, third bureaucratization.

The student movement of 1968 led to an essential change in the university structure. First, liberalization. Students acquired the possibility to actively participate in the life of their schools. They now can choose among school books, among subject matters, in universities also their classes, their professors. The power of a professor depends more on his or her personal authority than before, and the personal authority can depend more on the professors teaching and their ability to establish human relations with students. Although the change of university structures is a general tendency, there are essential differences among the states, for example, the professors personal power to place their students after graduation is very different in Europe, USA, and several Latin-American cities and states..

The same development – the liberalization of universities and the greater power of students – a desirable development in itself, went together with some (in my opinion) less desirable ones. For example, several new subject matters without any academic worth were included into the curriculum, partly due to political correctness, partly to the students desire to get a grade without mental effort, and finally to the desire of some teachers to get a position at all.

The second tendency which gained momentum in the last decades was to tie many occupations and positions to a degree from a tertiary institution or a high school certificate: several occupations which were filled and well practiced without degrees or certificates, are not allowed to be practiced without them. Although the certificate does not prove at all that those who own it are more able to perform the task than those who do not. Many young men and women, who do not need any diploma or certificate at all, must spend many years in schools, where they may learn something they could learn just by practicing the skill, or learn something they can not use at all. They need just a piece of paper as a condition for being employed.

The above mentioned tendencies lead to a new kind of frustration. The idea of equal opportunity was tied with that of equal worth. According to these ideas, every kind of occupation is of equal worth if someone works well or if someone excels in performing a function well. The slowing down of upwards mobility simultaneously with the pressure to get degrees for occupation where previously such degrees were not required, frustrated people. This frustration is a hotbed for the eruption of all kinds of populist demagoguery, racism included. Less in the United States, than in many European societies where the earlier feudal habits and attitudes were not entirely forgotten, where the “low” occupations are still despised.

The last thirty-four years saw the until then unheard of growth of bureaucracy in the university system and in many institutions of research. Peter Murphy proved statistically that whereas in the eighties of the 20th century universities all around the globe spent 40 percent of their funds on bureaucracy, by now they spend 60 percent of all their funds. Thus only 40 percent remains for everything else, students' stipend and professors' salary included. From this follows that the increasing tuition fees are not spent on education, but on the upkeep of bureaucracy. The upkeep of an entirely useless bureaucracy. The main task of professors is no more to teach but to fill out hundreds of papers, to document all their actions and the actions of their students. To offer my own example. To teach two weeks in a summer seminar, I had to present four documents (among others my university degree certificate) and fill out at least four papers to answer at least 10 different questions. I presume that in all universities at least ten if no more people are hired to invent the questions, collect answers from some twenty professors, group them and give a report of them. For what reason? For no other reason than keeping bureaucracy growing and swallowing up all the rest.

What can be the reason behind this unreason? Total loss in the trust of personal honesty. Everyone needs to be controlled many times over. It is presumed that student do not enroll in order to learn something, to hear something that interests them, but for the sole reason to get a good job and to earn much money. Since the motivations cannot be controlled and tested unless through a mind reading machine, they control what can be controlled, namely the data. As if the data could tell anything about the motives! How many of them (several teachers included) work through the internet to find out whether a student copied his term paper from there. Only a half an hour of consultation with a student would give them full answer to this inquiry. One can discuss the cheating with the guilty student and make him ashamed and change his

mind. But writing long reports looks easier. The sin, detected yet also corrected, would not be documented.

In a mass university there are so many students, one cannot know them, one cannot talk to them, one can only register them. And they need to be registered.

Needless to say, that bureaucracy, this Big Brother spies also on the professors. Perhaps their autobiographies are phony, perhaps their date of birth and marital status is incorrect. Everything needs to be checked, except the quality of teaching, the only thing that matters. (Bureaucracy has no qualification to check it.) We all know that one professor among *circa* a thousand is a cheat. But this shows rather sooner than later, thus no constant checking will eliminate this to occur. And what is more important: real cheats are the best at cheating bureaucracy itself, they will answer all the thousand questions fluently and satisfy them by presenting all the fake documents.

The desire to control, the distrust in the honesty of individuals, the distrust in the mental and intellectual power of single individuals characterize not just universities, but also institutions and laboratories of research.

Mass society distrusts the individual also if it comes to scientific research. Everyone believes in team work.

Let me accept Kuhn's distinction between revolutionary and normal science. I could accept that in case of normal science team work is more fruitful. But I doubt very much whether revolutionary science can flourish under the condition of team work. The distrust against individual scientific work has also to do something with the increase of bureaucracy.

Needless to say, modern science requires a lot of money. States, individual donors, funds etc need to spend enormous sums only for the equipments needed for research. No wonder then that neither states nor endowments are ready to give money for a single individual who claims to be on the way of a revolutionary discovery, but has not done it yet. Yet we also know, that revolutionary science is never the continuation of something that we already know, even if this knowledge is not exhausted. Scholars trotting on roads already known, can always add a little something to what is known, and this little something is very often important for keeping newborn alive or curing a rare illness, albeit not to make us understand its cause. They do not require a new paradigm.

New paradigms are always the results of the discovery by one or two persons, they are not fruits of team work. For, as we know it also from Einstein, the unconscious of the individual plays a pivotal role in it. As Koestler, writing on the most significant discoverers, showed, revolutionary science presupposes not association but dissociation. Not to think in line of previous discoveries, but in thinking together symptoms, phenomena, or occurrences which were hitherto not combined nor thought together. Dissociation can appear in dreams, takes mostly the form of an "intuition". Intuition has no place in teamwork, it can not occupy a place in it, for teams have no common unconscious.

When Murphy shows in the book I mentioned, that since the eighties no single new paradigm appeared, on the scientific heaven, that what goes on since this time

onwards is the slow building up of the results by normal science. he has a strong point.

Let me return to universities. The most lasting impression students receive comes from individuals not group, from a meaningful teacher of a passionate character, from someone unfitting to the average, not “normal” in the traditional sense. Once upon a time, even in my youth, middle schools were also rich in funny, sometimes ridiculous, always impressive personalities. Some teachers were mocked, parodied, because they were fascinating in a different way. At present university bureaucracy purifies universities from those dying out animals, giving preference to the mediocre and the average. No one has to stand out. How will then our students stand out?

All this was not meant as an indictment against mass universities, even less as a defense of traditional universities. But what I strongly suggest for the reform of universities is to get rid of half of the bureaucracy, to invest more trust into the single individual. From the money at the university’s disposal much more should be spent on students’ grants and researchers’ stipends. More freedom for students and young faculty to develop their best abilities, their best potentials into talents. I would suggest also more concern for general culture, what can be termed universalism.

Surely, in a music school a violin student must concentrate on learning how to play well, a chemistry student how to enter in the footsteps of present inquiries, and so on and so forth. But simultaneously the old recipe of *Bildung* needs to accompany the project. To understand history, to get a view on the state of the world in general, to become interested in fine arts. All those contribute to their ability and also to their readiness to play an active part as a well informed citizen in the matters of their states. To participate as concerned and rational thinking individuals and not just as members of one or the other pressure group.

I do not know whether the tendency toward bureaucratic rule of universities and also of many research institutes can be reversed, I suggest only that it should be reversed. For if it is not, creativity of our culture will get entirely lost and so will be upwards mobility. Political activity will be limited to professional politicians. Our iron age will set in.

[Revisione del testo inglese a cura di Franca Piergallini]