



The Idea of the University: Learning Processes

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The Idea of the University — *Learning Processes*

By Jürgen Habermas

In the inaugural issue of *Die Wandlung* [The Transformation], a journal founded shortly after the war by Karl Jaspers, Alfred Weber, Dolf Sternberger and Alexander Mitscherlich, there appeared the text of a lecture by Jaspers entitled “The Renewal of the University.” It had been held in 1945 to mark the reopening of the University of Heidelberg upon the philosopher’s return from inner immigration to reassume his Chair in Philosophy. Emphasizing the opportunity for a new beginning, Jaspers took up the central theme of his 1923 book “The Idea of the University,” which was republished in 1946. Fifteen years later, in 1961, the book appeared in a revised edition.¹ In the intervening period, Jaspers saw his hopes disappointed. Yet here Jaspers still proceeds from the premises of that sociology which had been implicit to German Idealism: An institution remains functional only so long as it vitally embodies its inherent idea. Should its spirit evaporate, an institution will petrify into something merely mechanical, like a soulless organism reduced to dead matter.

Not even the university can continue to form a whole once the unifying bond of its corporative consciousness dissolves. The functions the university fulfills for society must preserve an inner connection with the goals, motives and actions of its members. In this sense the university should institutionally embody, and at the same time motivationally anchor, a life form which is intersubjectively shared by its members, and which even bears an exemplary character. What since Humboldt has been called “the idea of the university” is the project of embodying an ideal life form. Moreover, this idea does not limit itself to one of the many particularized life forms of early bourgeois society, but — thanks to its intimate connection with science and truth — to something universal, something prior to the pluralism of social life forms. The idea of the university points to principles of formation according to which *all* forms of objective spirit are structured.

1. K. Jaspers and K. Rossmann, *Die Idee der Universität* (Heidelberg, 1961).

Even disregarding this extravagant claim to exemplary status, isn't the very premise that a vast and extraordinarily complex structure such as the modern university system be permeated and sustained by a mode of thought shared by all its members, unrealistic in the extreme? Couldn't Jaspers have learned years earlier from Max Weber that the organizational reality into which the functionally specified subsystems of a highly differentiated society imbed themselves rests on wholly different premises? The functional capability of such institutions depends precisely on a *detachment* of their members' motivations from the goals and functions of the organization. Organizations no longer embody ideas. Those who would bind organizations to ideas must restrict their operative range to the comparatively narrow horizon of the life world intersubjectively shared by their members. Thus, one of the many reverential articles with which the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* overindulged the University of Heidelberg on its 600th anniversary came to the sobering conclusion: "The assertion of unbroken faithfulness to Humboldt is the life-lie of our universities. They no longer have a formative idea."² From this standpoint, all those reformers who, like Jaspers, have appealed (and with ever weaker voices still appeal) to the *idea* of the university, belong to those purely defensive minds whose cultural criticism is rooted in a hostility to all forms of modernization.

It is undeniable that Jaspers shared that bourgeois cultural pessimism which formed the background ideology of the German Mandarins. But he was not the *only* one who, during the arguments of the 1960s for a long-overdue reform of the universities, reached back to ideas of the 19th century Prussian university reformers. In 1963, two years after the new edition of Jaspers' book, Helmut Schelsky entered the discussion with a piece bearing the title "Solitude and Freedom." And two years after this, the final draft of a long-debated SDS position paper appeared with the title "The University in a Democracy."³ Three documents of reform, from three generations, each offering a different perspective. Each marks a steadily increasing distance from Humboldt — and a growing sobriety concerning the idea of the university. Yet despite generational differences (and an evident intellectual reorientation since the end of the war), none of the three parties is able fully to abandon the notion that the central issue remained the critical renewal of this very idea.

2. K. Reumann, "Verdunkelte Wahrheit," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 24 March 1986.

3. W. Nitsch, U. Gerhardt and C. Offe, *Hochschule in der Demokratie* (Neuwied, 1965).

Twenty years and a half-heartedly executed, in part already retracted organizational reform of the universities separate us today from those attempts to give the university a new character in light of its renewed idea. What can we learn from the past two decades? Must the university, on its way towards functional specialization within an ever more swiftly differentiating system of knowledges, discard like an empty shell what once had been called its “idea?” Or does the frame which universities provide for scientific learning processes still account for a bundle of integrated functions which, while perhaps not in need of a normative self-image, nevertheless requires a somehow shared self-understanding of the university’s members — traces of a corporative consciousness?

II

Perhaps a look at the *external* development of the universities will suffice to answer these questions. The expansion in education after World War II was a worldwide phenomenon which led Talcott Parsons to speak of an “educational revolution.” In the German Reich between 1933 and 1939, the number of students had been cut in half, dropping from 121,000 to 56,000. In 1945, in the area later to become the Federal Republic, only 15 universities were left in existence. Already by the mid-1950s, 50 universities could again accommodate about 150,000 students. In the early 1960s, the course was set for a deliberate expansion of the post-secondary educational sector, and since that time the number of students has quadrupled. Today over a million students receive education at 94 universities.⁴ Of course, such absolute figures only reveal their true significance when compared with international trends.

In almost all Western industrial societies, the trend towards extending formal education began after World War II and continued until the end of the 1970s; in the developed socialist nations, the same expansion phase was concentrated in the 1950s. UNESCO figures show that, in the period between 1950 and 1980, secondary school attendance rates went

4. Not considered are 94 additional Trade Universities and Art Academies. See H. Köhler and J. Naumann, Trends der Hochschulentwicklung, *Recht der Jugend und des Bildungswesens* 6:32 (1984): 419 ff. An overview can be found in *Max Planck Institut für Bildungsforschung: Das Bildungswesen in der Bundesrepublik* (Hamburg, 1984) 228 ff.

from 30 to 80 percent; the corresponding university rates jumped from barely 4 percent to 30 percent. The parallels in the educational expansion of the various industrial societies become even clearer if we compare the selectivity of the educational system in the Federal Republic with that of the US, Great Britain, France and East Germany (as is done in the forthcoming Second Educational Report of the MPI for Educational Research). Although the national education systems have completely different structures, and despite the differences in their political and economic systems, the same orders of magnitude are reported for the highest qualification levels. If one defines the educational elite by higher academic achievements (usually by completion of a dissertation [*Promotion*]), it comprises between 1.5 percent and 2.6 percent of those born in a given year; if one defines it by completion of the most important forms of academic study (B.A., Master's, or State Examinations), the share lies between 8 percent and 10 percent. The authors of the Second Educational Report pursued their international comparisons into areas of qualitative specialization and found, for example, that publication rates and other external indicators of scholarly productivity in particular fields approximated one another to a surprisingly high degree — completely independent of whether the national university systems were more openly structured, or more sharply oriented towards selectivity and the formation of elites.

Furthermore, despite their stubborn resistance to government-mandated reforms, German universities have changed in more than just their quantitative dimensions. The most salient characteristics of a specifically German heritage have been smoothed away. Antiquated hierarchies were dismantled along with the *Ordinarien*-university; and with a certain leveling of status, the Mandarin ideology, too, lost its basis. External and internal differentiations have allowed teaching and research to become more specialized. In sum, even in their internal structures, West Germany's mass universities have come to resemble those of other industrial nations.

A more distanced perspective derived from international comparisons thus yields a picture which practically compels one to adopt a functionalist interpretation. According to this view, the general patterns of social modernization have also determined university developments (ones which began in West Germany a decade later than they did in East Germany or the other Western countries). During the period of greatest acceleration, educational expansion generated ideologies in step with

this. It appears that the dispute between reformers and defenders of the status quo was conducted by both sides under the false premise that the issue was whether to renew or retain the idea of the university. Within this ideological framework, a process took place which neither of the parties had desired — something the rebelling students fought against as “technocratic university reform.” Although labelled reform, it appeared that in fact only a new cycle had been initiated in the differentiation process of the scientific system — one which had become functionally autonomous here as it had everywhere else. From this perspective, universities present themselves as part of a system requiring less and less normative integration in the heads of professors and students the more it becomes self-regulating via systemic mechanisms and the more it orients itself to the environments of the economy and the planning administration. The pragmatic recommendations of the National Science Advisory Council, which demanded a shift of emphasis in favor of disciplinary autonomy and a differentiation of research and theory, fit all too well into this picture.⁵

Of course, the intellectual and political reserve of the Advisory Council leaves room for further interpretations. The cautious recommendations don't necessarily imply the kind of functionalist reading which seems to converge with the currently popular neoconservative models of interpretation. On the one hand, many favor a functionally differentiated scientific system, one for which the normatively integrating power of an intellectual center anchored in corporative self-understanding would only be a hindrance. Yet, on the other hand, anniversaries always provide convenient occasions to cloak the university's systemic autonomy by rhetorically affirming an earlier tradition of a wholly different, *normatively* intended autonomy. Thus veiled, the flows of information between the now functionally autonomous subsystems (for example, between the universities and the economic-military-administrative complex), can be all the more discreetly coordinated. In this view, a sense of tradition retains only compensatory value; an awareness of tradition counts as much as the size of the gaps that it is called upon to fill in a university robbed of its formative idea. Of course, sociologically considered, this neoconservative interpretation could again be merely the reflection of a business cycle that moves independently of the themes

5. See *Wissenschaftsrat: Empfehlungen und Stellungnahmen* (1984); *Wissenschaftsrat: Empfehlungen zum Wettbewerb im deutschen Hochschulsystem* (1985).

and theories to which it gave rise.

The activist educational policy initiated in West Germany during the overdue modernization push at the beginning of the 1960s was sustained until the end of the Great Coalition by a substantial consensus of all parties; during Brandt's government, the Federal Republic experienced an upswing in the educational policy sector — and the start of a polarization between the political parties on these issues. In 1974, the downswing finally began. Educational policy was hit from both sides by the onsetting economic crisis: university graduates faced worsened labor market conditions, while on the cost and financing side, the universities suffered from the government's fiscal crisis.⁶ Thus what the neoconservatives today view as a "realistic reorientation" of educational policy can also be seen as a recession phenomenon in the realm of educational planning, largely explainable in purely economic and political terms.⁷ However, even if the educational up- and downswings cut through all themes and theories, the functionalist interpretation which dominates today is still not simply to be accepted at face value. Processes of differentiation which have accelerated over the last two decades need not be brought under a single systems theoretical description leading to the conclusion that the universities have now completely outgrown the horizon of the life world.

Empirically, it appears to be an open question whether the stimuli behind the growth of knowledge wouldn't finally become paralyzed were they to specialize exclusively on the function of research. Scientific productivity might well depend upon the university's form, in particular upon that interplay of research with the training of future students, the preparation for academic careers, the participation in general education, cultural self-understanding and public opinion formation.

The universities are still rooted in the life world through this interpenetration of functions. So long as this connection is not completely torn asunder, the idea of the university is still not wholly dead. But the

6. K. Hüfner, J. Naumann, H. Köhler and G. Pfeffer, *Hochkonjunktur und Flaute: Bildungspolitik in der BRD* (Stuttgart, 1986).

7. An indication of this are the uneven developments in educational reform proposals from one country to the next. For example, last year 50 professors at the Collège de France presented to the President recommendations for educational reform which in their goals and tenor were very reminiscent of the reform climate in the Federal Republic during the 1960s. Recommendations inspired by Pierre Bordieu appeared in *Neue Sammlung* 3:25 (1985).

complexity and internal differentiation of this connection shouldn't be underestimated. When the classical German university was born, the Prussian reformers projected an image of it which suggested an oversimplified connection between scientific learning processes and the life forms of modern societies.

In what follows, I wish to recall the classical idea as held by Schelling, Humboldt and Schleiermacher, and then examine the three variants of its renewal offered by Jaspers, Schelsky and the SDS reformers.

III

Humboldt and Schleiermacher associate two notions with the idea of the university. First, they are concerned with the problem of how modern science, freed from the supervision of religion and the church, can be institutionalized without endangering its autonomy — whether through the authority of the government which secures the external existence of science, or through pressures from the side of the occupational and economic system, with its interest in the useful applications of scientific work. Humboldt and Schleiermacher see the solution to the problem in a governmentally organized autonomy of science which would protect the university from both political interventions and economic imperatives. At the same time — and this is the second notion — Humboldt and Schleiermacher want to explain why it is in the interest of the state itself to guarantee to the university the external organizational form of an internally unlimited freedom. Both thinkers were convinced that, if only scientific work were turned over to the dynamics of research processes, the universities would serve as focal points for moral culture, and indeed for the spiritual life of the nation generally.⁸

These two notions combine to form the idea of the university, and to explain several of the more striking characteristics of the German university tradition. They make comprehensible 1) the affirmative attitude of

8. "At the very least there is as little decent and noble life for the state as there is for the individual as long as one fails to attach a general meaning to the always narrowed competence in the area of official science. For the acquisition of all this knowledge the state as well as the individual makes as a natural and necessary prerequisite that it be grounded in science and that it be reproduced and completed through science." (F. Schleiermacher, "Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn (1808)," *Die Idee der deutschen Universität*, ed. E. Anrich (Darmstadt, 1959) 226.

an apolitical science toward state authorities, 2) the defensive attitude of the university *vis-à-vis* professional training, and 3) the key position of the philosophical faculty within the university as well as the emphatic significance attributed to science for culture and society as a whole. Thus, the idea of the university produces, on the one hand, a promising emphasis on scientific autonomy which points to the functional independence of the scientific system. Of course, this scientific autonomy is supposed to be perceived only in “solitude and freedom,” at a clear distance from bourgeois society and the political public sphere. And on the other hand, the idea of the university produces the general, culture-shaping power of a science in which the totality of the life world should reflexively concentrate itself.

The reformers of that age could envision the scientific process as a narcissistically self-enclosed process of research and teaching, since the *unity of teaching and research* was an integral demand of German Idealism. Whereas today discussions at the cutting edge of research and the presentation of this state of knowledge for purposes of instruction are two quite different things, Schelling (in his “Lectures on the Methodology of Academic Study”) still could maintain that the construction of philosophic thought itself gave rise to the form of its pedagogical presentation.⁹

In the same manner, the university was to owe its inner connection to the life world to the totalizing power of idealism. The reformers attributed to philosophy a unifying power with respect to (as we would say today) cultural tradition, to socialization and to social integration. Idealist Philosophy was first of all encyclopedically structured and would thus assure both unity amidst the multiplicity of scientific disciplines and the unity of science with art and morality. Philosophy commended itself as a form which reflected the whole of culture. Secondly, its Platonistic character was expected to assure the unity of training and general education. More specifically: as ideas are comprehended they simultaneously enter into the knower’s moral character, thus freeing it from all one-sidedness. This elevation to the Absolute opens the way for the all-around development of the individual person. Finally, the self-reflexive basis of idealistic philosophy promised the unity of science and enlightenment. While today philosophy has become a subject

9. F. W. J. Schelling, “Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums (1802),” *Die Idee der deutschen Universität* 20 .

that draws the esoteric interest of specialists, a notion of philosophy which proceeds from the self-reference of the knowing subject and develops all substantive knowledge along the path of a reflexive movement of thought could simultaneously satisfy both the specialist's esoteric interest in science and the layman's exoteric interest in self-understanding and enlightenment.¹⁰ Since philosophy, as Hegel would put it, expresses its age in thought, it should replace the socially integrative power of religion with the reconciliatory power of reason. Fichte could therefore envision that a university which institutionalized such a science would become the birthplace of a future, emancipated society, the very focus of national cultivation.¹¹

The risky and improbable aspect of this university idea (as encountered in the famous founding documents) first becomes clear when one realizes just what conditions would have had to be fulfilled for the successful *institutionalization* of such a philosophical science — a science which, solely through its inner structure, was intended to simultaneously make possible and guarantee (1) the unity of research and teaching, (2) the unity of the sciences, (3) the unity of science and general education, and (4) the unity of science and enlightenment.

Strictly understood, the unity of research and teaching meant that teaching and learning would only be conducted in a manner necessary for the innovative process of scientific progress. Science should be able to reproduce itself in the sense that the professors would train their own successors. The future researcher is the sole goal for which the university of researching scholars assumes the task of training. This view retained a certain plausibility for the philosophy faculty at least, so long as university professors replenished their ranks from the circle of *Gymnasium* teachers previously trained by them.

The idea of the unity of the sciences could only continue to gain force if philosophy in fact advanced to become the fundamental science [*Grundwissenschaft*] of the unified natural sciences and humanities. That is the significance of the polemic against “bread-and-butter” sciences, against the dispersion into specialized schools, against the derivative quality of those faculties which find “their unity not in knowledge directly, but rather in some external occupation.”

10. E. Martens and H. Schnädelbach, *Philosophie-Grundkurs* (Hamburg, 1985) 22 ff..

11. J. G. Fichte, “Deduzierter Plan einer in Berlin zu errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt,” *Die Idee der deutschen Universität* 217.

In institutional terms, the unity of science and general education presupposed the unity of teachers and students.¹² This cooperatively structured, fundamentally egalitarian and complementary relationship was to be realized in the discursive forms of the seminar. But this soon became irreconcilable with the more formal organization which quickly developed in the hierarchically designed research institutes of the natural sciences.

A final extravagance was the idea of the unity of science and enlightenment, inasmuch as it burdened the autonomy of the sciences with the expectation that, within its walls, the university could anticipate in microcosm a society of free and equal citizens. However, from the start it was unclear how this enlightening and emancipatory assignment could go hand in hand with the apolitical reserve the university was expected to maintain as the price for the political supervision of its freedom.

These institutional preconditions for an implementation of the fundamental idea of the German university were either non-existent from the start, or they became ever less capable of fulfillment during the course of the 19th century. First, a differentiated occupational system required academic preparation for more and more professional careers. In the long run, the advanced schools for engineering, commerce, pedagogy and art couldn't remain outside the universities. Secondly, the empirical sciences, which had emerged from the womb of the philosophical faculty, followed an ideal of procedural rationality which condemned to failure all attempts at encyclopedically embedding their substantive contents within an all-encompassing philosophical interpretation.¹³ This emancipation of the empirical sciences sealed the destruction of all metaphysical world views. In the midst of a pluralism of privatized religious beliefs [*Glaubensmaechten*], philosophy also lost its monopoly on interpreting culture as a whole.

Thirdly, science advanced to become an important productive force in industrial society. For example, pointing to Liebig's Institute in Giessen, the state government in Baden emphasized as early as 1850 the "extraordinary importance of chemistry for agriculture."¹⁴ The natural

12. W. Humboldt, "Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten (1810)," *Ibid.* 217.

13. See my review of Ringer's book: "Die deutschen Mandarine," *Philosophische-Politische Profile* (Frankfurt a.M., 1981) 485 ff..

14. J. Klüwer, *Universität und Wissenschaftssystem* (Frankfurt a.M., 1983) 1.

sciences forfeited their role of providing a world view in favor of producing technically useful knowledge. Thus, working conditions for research were tailored less to the functions of general education than to the functional imperatives of the economy and administration. Finally, academic education in Germany served to define a special class of academics, a social class of *Bildungsbürger* following the model of the upper-level civil servant.¹⁵ However, the establishment of a clear professional differentiation between popular and academic education confirmed class structures which negated both the universalist intent of the university idea and the promise it had held for an emancipation of society as a whole.¹⁶

To the extent that there was a growing awareness of these tendencies, the idea of the university had to be mobilized all the more vigorously against the “facts” — until it degenerated to the ideology of a professional class with high social prestige. For the humanities and social sciences, Fritz K. Ringer identifies the period of decline of the German Mandarins as the years between 1890 and 1933.¹⁷ In the sheltered inwardness enjoyed by these Mandarins, the neo-humanist educational ideal was deformed into the intellectually elitist, apolitical, conformist self-conception of an internally autonomous institution that remained far removed from practice while intensively conducting research.¹⁸

Of course, one must also see the positive side. In both forms — as idea as well as ideology — the idea of the university contributed to the brilliance and the internationally incomparable success of German university science throughout the 19th century, and even up to the 1930s of our own century. In particular, the state-organized scientific autonomy had consigned differentiation of scientific disciplines to the internal dynamic of the research processes themselves. Under the protection of an only superficially adopted educational humanism, the natural sciences had quickly won their autonomy and, for all their positivism, became a fruitful model even for the humanities and social sciences.¹⁹ At the same time, the ideology of the German Mandarins

15. L. von Friedeburg, “Elite-elitär?,” *Ordnung und Unordnung*, ed. G. Becker (Weinheim, 1986) 23 ff..

16. T. Ellwein, *Die deutsche Universität* (Königstein, 1985), 124 ff..

17. F. K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

18. See for this thesis J. Klüwer.

19. “The danger that humans only expend themselves in outer, environment

lent the universities a strong corporative self-consciousness, winning them support from the *Kulturstaat*, and recognition throughout society. And last but not least, the utopian surplus inherent to the university idea also preserved a critical potential which from time to time could be revived for a renewal of the institutions.

IV

That, at any rate, was the belief of reformers in the early 1960s. The first impulses toward renewal after 1945 had been insufficient. Apart from material shortages, there prevailed a deep exhaustion of the corporative self-consciousness. The idea of the university, in the traditional form of the Mandarin consciousness, had still survived the Nazis; but given its demonstrated impotence against (or even complicity with) the Nazi regime, it stood convicted of lacking any substance. And yet, even on the defensive after 1945, traditionalists of the Humboldtian idea were strong enough to stave off well-meant attempts at reform, and to strike a deal with the pragmatically-minded colleagues on the Science Advisory Council [*Wissenschaftsrat*], set up in the late 1950s. Thus, the unavoidable quantitative growth of the universities took place as an expansion within otherwise unaltered structures.²⁰

In this situation, Jaspers again returned to Humboldt; Schelsky and the SDS students attempted a critical appropriation of this heritage — while maintaining a certain social-scientific distance by prefacing their reform proposals with a sober diagnosis of those structural transformations the universities had undergone in the meantime. In the background, one already finds international comparisons of educational sociologists, demand analyses from educational economists and civil rights postulates of educational politicians. Schelsky summarizes all this with the term “self-propelling dynamics” [*Sachgesetzlichkeiten*], for

modifying actions and then bind everything, other people and themselves, to this object level of action. This new form of human self-alienation, which can rob oneself and the other of inner identity, this new metaphysical temptation of humankind contains the danger that the creator loses himself in his work, the builder in his constructions. People are horrified at the thought of transferring themselves into self-produced objectivity, into a constructed being, and yet they work unceasingly on furthering this very process of scientific-technical self-objectification.” (H. Schelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit* [Hamburg, 1963], 299).

20. See T. Ellwein 238.

these processes have a systemic character and produce structures which detach themselves from the life world. They undermine the corporative consciousness of the university, exploding those fictions of unity which Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Fichte and Schelling once hoped to establish through the totalizing power of philosophic reflection. Interestingly enough, though, Schelsky no more favored a simple compliance of the universities with these systemic imperatives than did the leftist reformers. He did not opt for the sort of permanent technocratic reform which has meanwhile become established practice. This is surprising: The theory of technocracy Schelsky developed around the same time would have led one to expect this. Instead, he dipped into the fund of Humboldtian ideas in order to stress the need to “shape” the “self-propelling dynamics”:

The decisive point now is that these ‘objective tendencies’ are one-sided . . . , that countervailing forces must come into play, ones which will not arise automatically but can only be generated by creative efforts.²¹

The ever-differentiating system of sciences should not simply coalesce with the economy, technology and administration, but rather should remain rooted in the life world via the complex bundle of its classic functions. And again, this interplay of functions should be explained by the structure of science itself.

Thus, the theoretically ambitious reform initiatives of the early 1960s again recommenced from the concept of a science which was still credited with a (somehow) unifying power; again the university was conceived as only the institutional embodiment of this idealist power. Naturally, the position of philosophy vis-à-vis the sciences had meanwhile changed to such a degree that philosophy itself no longer formed the heart of the differentiating scientific fields. But what should assume the vacant position? Was it really necessary to retain the idea of a unity of the sciences? The totalizing power of the scientific process could certainly no longer be thought of as a synthesis and secured by a metaphysical connection to the world as a whole. Totalizing theories of that sort were no longer available.

Jaspers offers a comparatively conventional answer. He admits that

21. Schelsky 275.

the rationality of the open-ended, purely methodically determined sciences is wholly procedural and can no longer provide a substantive unity amidst the unpredictably splintering canon of disciplines. Yet Jaspers still wants to reserve a special role for philosophy *vis-à-vis* the now emancipated disciplines, even though philosophy had been forced to the margins and reduced to the tasks of illuminating *Existenz* and of analyzing *das Umgreifende*. The sciences are said to *require* the leadership of philosophy, because only philosophy can secure the motivation for an unconditional desire for knowledge and the attitude of scientific thinking. Thus, philosophy at least retains the role of a guardian of the idea of the university — and thus a vocation as the pacemaker of reforms.

Schelsky's reflections are less idealistic. He replaces philosophy with a theory of science, dividing the specialized fields into three formal categories: the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. Individual fields develop autonomously, but the three categories with their specific forms of knowledge are each in their own way functionally intermeshed with modern society. They can no longer be collectively encompassed by philosophical reflection. Rather, a philosophical type of thinking now emerges from inside the sciences and settles within each discipline as its corresponding form of self-reflection. Thus, an equivalent emerges for the now fictive unities of the Humboldtian university:

Inasmuch as philosophy arises from the specialized sciences and, in making these its object, critically transcends them, it indirectly regains as its object the whole of scientific civilization. Inasmuch as it explores the limits and conditions of the particular sciences, it holds them open . . . against blinding social constraints.²²

During this same period, I myself became an advocate of a type of critique of science intended to explain the interrelations among methodologies, global background assumptions and functional contexts of application and developed in my book *Knowledge and Human Interests*.²³ I held the same hopes as Schelsky: That in this dimension of critical self-reflection, the relations of research processes to the life world could

22. *Ibid.* 290.

23. J. Habermas, "Universität in der Demokratie - Demokratisierung der Universität," *Kleine politische Schriften* I-IV [Frankfurt a.M., 1981] 110 ff. and 134 ff..

be rendered transparent; not just the relations to the applications and implementations of scientific knowledge, but above all the relations to culture as a whole, to socialization processes, to the continuation of tradition and to general issues in the public sphere.

A second element of the Humboldtian heritage was also revived with these reform initiatives. I am referring to the exemplary significance given to scientific autonomy, beyond the constitutional guarantee of freedom of teaching and research. Jaspers understood by scientific autonomy the realization of an international communication net which would protect the free state from the total state.²⁴ Schelsky gave to this view a personalistic, existentialist note: scientific autonomy meant a distancing from, and a moral sovereignty over pressures arising from the “self-propelling dynamics,” the system’s imperatives of state and economy.

And both the authors of the SDS position paper and leftist reformers joined in the defense of what was then called the democratization of the university, with the expectation of stimulating practices of participatory self-administration.

Here is not the place to offer an evaluation of the organizational reforms which were then actually carried out; rather, I must content myself with the general observation that those goals indebted to a critical appropriation of the university idea have not been realized. In a postscript added in 1970 to a new edition of his book, Schelsky explained the failure of the reforms by the fact that the science system, under the pressure of a sharp rise in complexity, had undergone a high degree of differentiation and thus “could no longer be held together in its various functions by a shared self-image.”²⁵ I think that the term “self-image” [*Leitbild*] betrays a reliance upon premises which were in fact too naive to keep pace with the dynamics of differentiation in the various fields of research. Take first the idea of a unifying self-reflection of the disciplines. The assumption that a form of reflection not springing from the logic of research itself could be grafted onto it was obviously unrealistic. The history of the modern sciences (Kuhn, etc.) teaches us that “normal science” is characterized by routines and by an objectivism which protects everyday research from unnecessary problematizations. Advances in self-reflection are triggered by crises, but even then the replacement of

24. K. Jaspers and K. Rossmann 33 ff.

25. H. Schelsky 243.

degenerating paradigms by new ones proceeds more like a natural process (Toulmin). Where, by contrast, reflection on fundamental questions and critique of science are continually conducted, they establish themselves — like philosophy itself — as just one more specialty among many others. Equally unrealistic was the expectation that participation of all involved groups would alone be enough to fill the self-administration of the universities with political vitality — especially when the government had to force reforms through against the will of the professors.

But if the inner integrity of the university cannot be saved even under these revised premises, musn't we admit that this institution can get along perfectly well without that fond notion it once had of itself? Does anything remain upon which an integrating self-understanding of universities could be founded?

V

The view suggested by systems theory is equally unrealistic. Luhmann assumes that all spheres of social action are held together beneath the level of normative orientations by value-neutral steering mechanisms such as money or administrative power. For systems theory, the integrating force of ideas and institutions belongs *a priori* to the superstructure above a substratum of flows of communication, which are systemically linked without requiring any further norms. Systems theory doesn't even ask whether this *can* be valid for all spheres of action, e.g., for cultural action systems like the science system. Until now, the heart of the science system has been located in a *function-concentrating* institution — in the universities, which by no means have outgrown the horizon of the life world in the style of, for example, capitalist corporations or international agencies. There is one experience which speaks against such system-theoretical overgeneralization, which Schelsky formulated this way:

The unique aspect in the institutional development of the modern university resides in the fact that, in *its* case, functional differentiation occurred *within* the same institution, one which thus experienced scarcely any loss of function through transferral of tasks to other agencies. On the contrary, one could even speak of an enrichment of functions, at least of an increase in significance and of a broadening of the

university's functional areas over the last hundred years of its development.²⁶

Thus Talcott Parsons, in his book on the American university, proceeds from the assumption that the university system simultaneously fulfills *four* functions: the central function of (1) research and the reproduction of the academic personnel coincides with (2) professional training (and the production of new information and technologies) on the one hand, and (3) general education and (4) contributions to cultural self-understanding and intellectual enlightenment, on the other. Parsons offers as his example the American university system, with its clear institutional differentiation, and assigns the first three of those functions mentioned to different institutions — the graduate schools, the professional schools and the colleges. But each of these institutions is again so differentiated internally that each (with varying emphasis) branches out again towards all the other functional areas. Only the fourth function does not have a carrier institution of its own. This is filled by the intellectual role of the professors. If one considers that Parsons locates in this fourth function not only outwardly directed efforts of enlightenment addressed to the public, but also reflection upon the role of the sciences themselves and upon the relationship existing between the spheres of cultural value (science, morality, and art), one realizes that this catalogue of functions reproduces in a slightly different guise exactly what the Prussian reformers once had described as the “unities”: the unity of research and teaching, the unity of science and general education, the unity of science and enlightenment and the unity of the sciences.

Of course, the significance of this last idea has changed substantially, for the openly differentiated multiplicity of scientific disciplines no longer represents per se the medium which can tie all these functions together. Yet today, as earlier, the university learning processes do not simply stand in an inner connection to the reproductive functions of the life world. Going beyond mere academic career preparation, they contribute to general socialization processes by introducing students to the mode of scientific thinking, i.e., to the adoption of a hypothetical attitude vis-à-vis facts and norms. Going beyond the acquisition of expert knowledge, they contribute to intellectual enlightenment

26. *Ibid.* 267.

by offering informed interpretations and diagnoses of contemporary events, and by taking concrete political stands. Going beyond mere reflection on methodology and basic theory, they contribute to the self-understanding of the sciences within the whole of culture by supplying theories of science, morality, art and literature. It is rather the very form of organizing scientific learning processes in the medium of academic discourse which still roots the highly differentiated and specialized disciplines in the life world via the simultaneous fulfillment of those various functions.

Of course, the differentiation of specific fields demands a correspondingly sharp differentiation within the university. Here, from different institutional vantage points, different groups perceive the various functions as bearing varying weights. The corporative consciousness has consequently boiled down to an intersubjectively shared awareness that, while it is true others may be “doing science” in differing ways, taken altogether they fulfill not only a single, but rather an entire complex of functions. The fact that the functions remain tied together, however, can hardly still be attributed, as Schelsky thought, to the binding power of the normative self-image of the German university. And one might ask: would that even be desirable?

The corporative self-understanding of the university would be in even deeper trouble if it were anchored in something like a normative ideal, for ideas come and go. The essence of the old university idea was that it was supposed to have been grounded in something more stable than just the content of particular ideas — it was to be anchored, procedurally anchored, in the scientific process itself. But if science or the scientific method is no longer suitable as such an anchor, since the multiplicity of disciplines no longer leaves room for the totalizing power of either an all-encompassing philosophy or even for the mere self-reflection of science arising from the individual disciplines themselves, what could then possibly serve to ground an integrated self-understanding of the corporative body?

The answer is already to be found in Schleiermacher:

The first law of all efforts aimed at knowledge (is): *communication*. Nature herself has clearly enunciated this law in the impossibility of producing something, even if only for oneself, without language. Thus, purely from the drive for knowledge itself. . . one can derive all the associations necessary for its sat-

isfaction, all the various types of communication and community necessary for enhancing knowledge.

I borrow here one of Schleiermacher's "Occasional Thoughts on the German Conception of the University"²⁷ without sentimentality, because I seriously believe that it is the communicative or discursive forms of scientific argumentation which in the final analysis hold the learning processes together in their various functions. Schleiermacher viewed the notion that "a scientific person could live shut off by himself in solitary labors and undertakings" as a "sheer delusion." However much he appears to work alone in the library, at his writing desk, or in the laboratory, his learning processes are inextricably interwoven with a public "community of investigators" (Peirce). The various disciplines have constituted themselves within specialized internal public spheres, and they can retain their vitality only within these structures — associations, annual conferences, journals, etc. The specialized internal public spheres coalesce and branch apart again in the university's programs. What Humboldt said of the communicative association of professors and their students is true not only for the ideal form of the seminar, but also for the normal form of scientific work:

If they (students and younger colleagues) were not to gather voluntarily around the teacher, then he should seek them out in order to get closer to his goal by combining his more experienced powers (which for that very reason, however, tend also to be more easily one-sided and less vital) with their weaker power, which is still impartially and courageously striving in all directions.²⁸

I can assure you that this sentence no less faithfully describes the working presuppositions of the more solidly organized operation of a Max-Planck Institute than it does that of a philosophy seminar. Even outside the university, scientific learning processes still retain certain features of their roots in the universities. They all live from the stimulating and productive power of discursive disputes that carry the promissory note of generating surprising arguments. The doors stand open, and at any moment a new face can suddenly appear, a new idea can unexpectedly arrive.

27. *Die Idee der deutschen Universität* 224.

28. *Ibid.* 378.

I would like to avoid repeating the mistake of stylizing the “community of investigators” as something exemplary. The egalitarian and universalistic content of their forms of argumentation expresses only the norms of scientific discourse, not those of society as a whole. But they share in a pronounced way that communicative rationality, the forms of which modern societies (which are decidedly not a *Leitbild* from the past) must employ to understand themselves.

Translated by John R. Blazek

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