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The university and institutional overstretch

Olivia Muñoz-Rojas

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Whenever I hear the words 'new' or 'crisis' attached to any social or cultural phenomenon – in this case, the university – my immediate and intuitive reaction is to remind myself that there are few things that are indeed as novel as they appear, and that it is easy usually to find analogous situations and similar preoccupations in the past. In this essay I want to problematize the crisis of the university and the emergence of the 'new university' structure by succinctly exploring the historical trajectory and challenges of the modern university over the past two-hundred years. A caveat: in looking back into the past, I certainly do not want to make a case for historical relativism and understate the significance of current events just because the university has been through crises before. (That history itself, as a discipline, is under threat is at any rate a bold antidote against any form of historical relativism. Cf. Grafton 2011.) But, generally, I do believe history is a good point of departure for better understanding the present. I will then go on to suggest that part of the university system's present difficulties stem from the multiple and contradictory roles it has acquired over time, combined with a lack of genuine self-criticism. I will end the essay with a set of fundamental questions about the structure and purpose of the university that need to be addressed anew.

In 1792, Isaac Haffner, professor of theology at the University of Strasbourg, published an essay on how to organize an establishment for the *hautes sciences* where he wrote:

> Every well organized university ought to be a literary establishment that embraces all the branches of human knowledge. In spite of how little we may have reflected on the links that exist among them, it is easy to perceive that they assist each other, that there is a more or less visible chain that unites them. It would be dangerous, therefore, if we

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> were to separate them from each other; if we were to condemn any of them to oblivion, degrading one in some way in order to increase the merit of another, because in the end all of them would suffer from such a violent and arbitrary intervention (Haffner 1792, 7-8) (author's translation).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when Haffner wrote his essay, the university in a number of European countries seemed on the verge of extinction. In France specifically, many faculties did not have more than a few enrolled students (Sanz and Bergan 2006, 123). The old universities – and academia as such – appeared unable to recover from a state of ruin and neglect, unable to catch up with the utilitarian needs of growingly industrialized European society. To the emerging ruling class knowledge had to be productive, efficient, measurable, etc. A compromise between, on the one hand, the need for applicable science and specialization and, on the other, a concept of knowledge based on the idea of the ultimate unity of science (cf. Haffner's quote), inspired by German idealism, famously materialized in Humboldt's University of Berlin, founded in 1810. Humboldt's model for institutionalized higher learning established the coexistence of teaching and research in clearly differentiated disciplines, yet under the same physical and intellectual roof (university as 'unity in diversity'). The model was soon picked up elsewhere.

If this was indeed a revolutionary moment in the longstanding history of academia, it should not escape us that substantial changes have taken place since. Above all, over the course of the past two-hundred years there has been an increasing democratization of access to higher education. It is not just that women and other population groups previously marginalized from higher education have been incorporated to the latter, but the idea – especially in post-war social-democratic Europe – that every youth ought to attend university as a safe recipe for, almost a guarantee of, a life with better professional, and thus material, prospects. This idea carries with it one of the kernels of the crisis that the university faces today: the tension or contradiction between the elitist, idealist origins of the university and its present function as the professional trainer of the labour force. We need only evoke the origins and trajectory of the university – from the Athenian schools to the medieval cathedral schools and the American colleges – to understand that we are dealing with an institution that is based on the tacit understanding that knowledge is an exclusive (at one point sacred) possession, which also explains why its transmission has tended to take place in secluded settings, and why universities hold the mo-

nopoly on the distribution of higher learning credentials (cf. Pedersen 2009 and Lindberg 2007). The elitist views predicated by Plato and other founders of ancient schools together with the monastic imprint that the early medieval cathedral schools left on the academic institution have survived over time as has the guild mentality that characterized the pre-industrial universities (cf. Lucas 1994, 38). Elitism, seclusion and corporatism (not in the commercial or financial sense, but as a system that views the academic community as a self-sufficient, organically structured body) are concepts that still apply to the university today. Yet, at the same time, over the past fifty years in particular, we have witnessed the appearance of more and more universities and students; urban campuses, specifically, are growing; and universities receive funding not just from the state but increasingly from private entities in exchange for providing skilled labour and scientific discoveries – all this seems to question the premise that universities are elitist, secluded and organized as autonomous organic bodies. But we also know that it does not mean that universities are open and accessible to everyone (cf. Smart 2009, 34, Becker and Hecken 2009, 235), perfectly integrated in their surrounding communities, and not defensive of their autonomy and the monopoly on defining what counts as higher knowledge and who possesses it.

Each attempt to transform the university over the past two-hundred years has emerged in response to the effects of this essential tension or contradiction – of being *part* and *apart* of the modern, capitalist system, and its ever-evolving structure. As a result of the attempts to solve this contradiction the university today suffers from what one may call institutional overstretch or multiple roles strain. Because, is it possible for universities to reconcile such different roles as that of the custodian of intellectual rigour, the curator of historic scholarship, the promoter of scientific innovation for the common good, the professional skills trainer, the universalist educator in civic values, the provider of applicable and money-spinning research, the buffer against youth unemployment, and, last but not least, the critical observer of society, including university itself? It is tempting to answer negatively to what seems like a rhetorical question anyway, and instead propose that the problem is precisely that the university has acquired multiple functions over time, and that we need to be more precise about what roles we do want it to play. But then we stumble onto another difficult conceptual question: who is 'we'? Scholars, students, tax-payers, public administrators, employers...?

There have been different attempts to respond to these two questions over time and across continents. In many European and

Latin American countries, for example, there has been an emphasis on the roles of the university as the curator of historic scholarship, the civic educator and the critical observer of society (not necessarily of university itself). To illustrate these different roles, one may think of the special importance placed on the transmission of particular schools of thought and scholarly traditions in continental Europe, the close ties between the university and the development of a national citizenship project in countries like Mexico, or the effective use of the university as a platform of social and intellectual activism in countries like France. The resources for performing these roles have largely come from the state and, hence, from tax-payers. In the United States, on the other hand, the emphasis has been on the promotion of scientific innovation (not always for the common good), the custody of intellectual rigour (cf. the peer-review system), and the provision of lucrative research. The funding for these more entrepreneurially-oriented activities initially came from philanthropy (the Fords, the Carnegies, the Rockefellers), and later, especially from the 1950s, from governmental institutions and private companies who benefit from universities' research (Smith and Bender 2008, 3-5).

These are, of course, gross simplifications which override important nuances and differences between countries, but are helpful in hinting at the ways in which two major modern university systems (the European and the North American) have sought maintaining a balance among roles more or less successfully. It is worth considering the both negative and positive effects that have emerged from the two systems' attempts to reconcile sometimes conflicting functions. For example, among the negative outcomes there is the clash between job and status expectations of graduates and the inflation of degrees that we encounter in many European countries. In places like Spain, the proliferation of master courses (which previously did not exist there) is partly symptomatic of the devaluation of undergraduate degrees. A collateral effect of universal access to higher education has been that it is no longer enough to have an undergraduate degree to aspire to a basic, let alone ascending, professional career. Such devaluation of undergraduate degrees affects a whole generation who is frustrated at not seeing its investment in, and commitment to, higher education rewarded in terms of income and status. As an example of the sometimes positive effects of reconciling contradictory roles, on the other hand, one may think of how the post-war collaboration of US universities with the Defense Department – and the institutionalization of the so-called military-industrial-university complex in the 1950s and '60s – made a number of US universities exceptionally afflu-

ent (cf. Leslie 1993). Partly thanks to this money, the university system could afford the development of new, cutting-edge, critical disciplines such as post-colonial theory and gender studies. What's more, even in campuses whose schools were directly collaborating in the development of military technology some of the strongest anti-war protests took place in the 1960s and 70s (cf. Heineman 1994) – perhaps a particularly bold example of the essential contradiction of being part and apart of the capitalist system.

Nevertheless, we have now reached a point, obviously accelerated by the current economic crisis, where even the potentially positive externalities resulting from reconciling opposite roles are disappearing or no longer valued: neither foundations, nor the state (that is, tax-payers) nor private companies seem ready to pay for anything other than what is strictly useful and necessary to maintain the present economic and political system alive in spite of its blatant flaws. In this stage of capitalism there seems to be neither the need nor the room for universalistic, civic educational projects or the production and assimilation of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. As a result, the tendency is that the roles of the university are increasingly reduced to two: the professional skills trainer and the provider of applicable and profitable research. It goes without saying that both the skills and the kind of research that universities in this model need to provide are those presently demanded by the market and by the state – to the extent that the latter tries (or is forced) to replicate the market. Fundamental skills students need to be trained in are: ability to, and ways of, increasing cost efficiency; capacity to identify and exploit new market opportunities; ability to persuade clients and customers of the benefits of x or y, etc. It is also obvious to everyone that there are certain disciplines and fields that are simply less fit for these purposes. For the moment, some university managers are trying (at least half-heartedly) to salvage these disciplines by changing their logic and aims. For example, if you teach history or critical theory, you should not worry as much about transmitting the ideas and facts that constitute the content of the course – let alone a particular *Weltanschauung* – as ensuring that students acquire professional arguing and presenting skills that will serve them when they are hired for writing government reports or introducing prospective benefit increases at company board meetings (because even though some of your students might not be aiming for these kind of jobs, these are the kind of jobs most of them will have to take). Furthermore, there is the implicit assumption that if you place too much emphasis on the content of the course, if you ask your students to take critical theory seriously in this case, you

will jeopardize their ability to survive and find satisfaction in the kind of life that awaits them.

For many of us it is difficult not to write about these transformations without incurring a certain ironic or even sarcastic tone, but there are many more people for whom all these adjustments are perfectly sensible, and maybe even a way of finally overcoming the institutional overstretch. And this, I believe, is very important to keep in mind. If a number of us believe that the main role(s) of the university ought to be different, we need, first of all, to be self-critical. What I have defined earlier as the historical essence of university and academia – elitism, seclusion and corporatism – is often lurking behind academics' passionate defence of the university as the custodian of intellectual rigour and historic scholarship, the democratizing educator, the critic of society, etc. The tacit, self-abrogated moral and intellectual superiority that the academic community launches onto the face of the market and the state – the perceived adversaries – is not helpful if it is not supported, in parallel, by a thorough examination and acknowledgment of the contradictions that plague this age-old institution. The collaboration towards the development of lethal military technology and the education of undemocratic political elites from developing countries are but two contemporary and particularly prominent examples of the kind of realities that jeopardize the credibility of universities, North American and European in particular, complicating the efforts to develop a coherent defence of the institution as such and its critical role in society.

Yet, going back to the beginning of this essay, university, academia or higher learning (however we prefer to call it) has survived crises before, and, as Haffner's quote suggests, the challenge to the perceived integrity of science and knowledge, the threat of certain disciplines disappearing because of their allegedly unproductive nature, as well as the accusation of elitism and seclusion, have been there for as long as the modern university, as we know it, exists. Crises, as the popularized Chinese proverb goes, are moments of danger and opportunity. I think the current situation is an opportunity for asking ourselves, both as members of the academic community and as ordinary citizens, very bold questions that could help define an alternative university model that is neither a resigned acceptance of the demands of the market, nor a defensive response to what is perceived as an illegitimate intervention of the market and the state: Who should attend university and with what purpose? What are the aims of scientific research and, in particular, social scientific and humanistic research? Who should be paying for university teaching and research? What is the role of the university as a social actor? Straightforward but

difficult questions that may have been asked (and possibly even answered) at different moments in the past, but that need honest and responsible answers today.

NB This essay has greatly benefited from the author's participation in Antoni Muntadas' project *About Academia*, exhibited in the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 3 March–7 April 2011, and at the Arizona State Museum and the American Academy in Rome subsequently. See http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/muntadas.html

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