

Markus Baumanns

The Future of Universities and the Fate of Free Inquiry and Academic Freedom

CONTRARY TO WHAT THE TITLE OF THIS SECTION SUGGESTS, I BELIEVE THE time for free inquiry and academic freedom at European universities has rarely been better than at present; that the debates and results arising from independent scientific discourse have rarely had a better chance of blossoming and evoking a response than in the time in which we now live; and that the basic rules of university and scholarly work in general are, by no means, seriously threatened in Europe—especially when compared with many other regions of the world.

PRINCIPLES OF THE UNIVERSITY

In speaking in favor of this provocative thesis, I presume at the same time that certain fundamental principles and objectives are an inseparable part of the work of universities and scholarly work in general. These principles, which can be distilled to four, have developed over the centuries:

1. The most important principle of university and scholarly endeavor is the freedom to research and to teach. In the United States, artistic and scholarly freedom, as a product of freedom of opinion, are protected by the First Amendment. Academic freedom is also part

of the German constitution. If it is really to give rise to important findings, scholarship needs to be free of all forms of influence directed against its content. It must be able to work independently, without prejudice and focused solely on the topic.

2. Ever since their emergence in "old Europe," in Bologna and Paris, universities have been places of education and training. Subsequently, they became places of research. Wilhelm von Humboldt declared universities to be the home to research and scholarship. It was also Humboldt who postulated the need for the unity of research and teaching.
3. The need to give universities a place in society, adapting them at the same time to the requirements of society, became apparent at an early stage. Medics, theologians, teachers, and lawyers could thereby be taught within the confines of society and be prepared to practise their professions in the interest of society. If universities failed to discharge their duties in a satisfactory manner, the state assumed the examination of graduates unceremoniously, conferring some form of certification geared toward permitting university graduates access to the profession of their choosing. This is what happened, for example, in the case of lawyers, whose abilities were particularly needed in the service of the state:

The birth of the state examination in jurisprudence in Germany was marked by the "General Decree Relating to Improvement of the Judicial System" (*Allgemeine Verordnung die Verbesserung des Justizwesens betreffend*) dating from June 21, 1713. The Prussian King Frederick I was highly dissatisfied with the quality of lawyers, despite the existing examinations. His minister of justice, Christian Friedrich von Bartholdi, ascertained that "young people who had been given a good basis in the theory of jurisprudence could not however correctly learn the *applicationem juris ad factum, praxin et observationem* elsewhere than in the courts themselves." He therefore suggested that "with the perspective

of filling a vacancy they should be engaged as *auditores absque votum*," though their acceptance "into the service of community" should be based on a strict examination approved by state authorities.

A university education—particularly if supported by funds from the general public—must be adapted to the needs of society.

4. The original meaning of the word *universitas* does not designate a "multitude of subjects," as is often falsely claimed, but a "community of teachers and students." It is this close interplay between the professors and the students that stimulates the intellect, thereby equipping it for discovery and new ideas.

In the course of the history of universities these principles have emerged, have been put to the test, have been confirmed or rejected, and have been further developed. Every generation is well advised to reflect on these principles, and to ask itself whether and to what extent universities still satisfy their demands.

The emergence of the New School provides evidence in favor of these principles; the historians Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson resigned their offices as professors in protest against the dismissal of two colleagues on the faculty who had protested against the entry of the United States into the First World War. Beard and Robinson saw the freedom to engage in research and scholarship as endangered.

The second trigger for the founding of the New School was also a consequence of experiences gained at traditional universities that, in the view of the founders, no longer complied with the aforementioned principles. The New School laid claim to drafting a blueprint for a new social community of teachers and students—one in which the professors and the students saw themselves as partners in the acquisition and generation of knowledge.

Even the third incentive for founding the New School is closely bound to one of these principles: the university's move in the year 1927 (from its initial location in cozy quarters in Chelsea to West 12th Street

in Greenwich Village) under its then president, Alvin Johnson—who is inseparably tied up with the name of the New School—was also a “move to the center of society.” The new location could be easily reached by New Yorkers—on foot, by bus or by subway—making it convenient not only for students of the social sciences, but also for adults attending the many evening courses on the topics of art and cultural heritage. There is perhaps hardly a New Yorker who has not taken part in an adult education program of the New School. Thus, the New School selected its new home location in the midst of society.

THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES IN UPHEAVAL

What are, then, the possible constraints of our day and age that threaten to endanger the aforementioned principles? I will focus here on the European university landscape, considering the relationship between these principles and another development giving rise to much discussion in continental Europe: the so-called Bologna Process, which aims, by 2010, to rearrange all courses of study in Europe into a unified structure of bachelor's and master's degrees.

For the European and particularly for the German universities, this aspiration to unify the European higher-educational landscape gives rise to what can be described, without exaggeration, as the biggest revolution affecting universities since Humboldt's day and age. So how do free inquiry and academic freedom fit in with the future condition of the European universities? Is there perhaps an implicit threat here? Will the aforementioned principles be damaged?

At present you will find, especially in Germany, a clear majority of university members who take exactly this view. And although there are as yet no truly representative polls available, I will risk the claim that, when it comes to the students, things are seen differently. A majority of students value the enormous benefits brought about by the Bologna Process. And I myself take the view that the benefits of the Bologna Process, despite interim problems, outweigh the disadvantages.

1. Bologna implicitly transfers the responsibility for universities to

where it actually belongs, namely, to the universities themselves. Universities, after all, are responsible for changing programs: they define their research and learning profiles independently, and act autonomously. For our American friends this may sound strange, because it may appear obvious that universities should themselves decide their allocations of funds, their recruitment of professors and their curricula. Particularly in Germany, however, both central government and the federal states have so far massively interfered in such processes, determining the budget and the appointment of new professors. Bologna helps to drive back this state influence. Together with the above-mentioned changes in Germany's higher-educational establishments, Bologna thus becomes a pioneer of necessary change in the German higher-educational system—and an ally in the cause of greater freedom for universities. This increase in freedom is necessarily challenging for the universities. Freedom is, after all, strenuous.

2. The introduction of bachelor's and master's programs provides an opportunity to restore the importance of teaching to its former value, before the decades during which this value was successively lost. Freedom as applied to research and teaching has been all too often misunderstood in Germany's past. Some faculty took this freedom to mean that they need not concern themselves with students only to a subordinate degree. The students themselves had no rule of thumb to apply to a professor who simply decided to "miss" consulting hours, or who had not been seen in the university for half a year. But what about the time required for research, a counterargument raised by some representatives of the scholarly community? It is interesting to note that so far only 15 percent of the German higher-educational establishment is responsible for some 80 percent of scholarly publications.

The missing structures and selection of students at German universities have turned these institutions into mass universities, where the quality of the teaching has—quite naturally—suffered greatly. It makes a difference whether a professor is required to give

central lectures to 500 students or to 80. Too many students also find themselves in lecture rooms without knowing exactly whether this is really the right subject for them. They are seldom directly spoken to, and many have even completed their entire period of studies at the university right up to the exams before hearing that they have been unable to satisfy the examination requirements—in other words, after having spent four to six years at the university. The student dropout rate at the German universities of the past was accordingly very high. The Bologna structure therefore represents an opportunity for students and professors alike. With regular performance checks the students can assess at an early stage whether this is the correct course of studies for them, or whether they ought to change subjects. The courses then become smaller, and the principle of *universitas* is again revived. This relates to a subsequent selection process. Critics will object, at this point, that in an international comparison we have too few students, according to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) statistics. To this I would only reply that the number of first-year students is less important than the number of successful graduates and the quality of the teaching—regardless of international comparisons.

3. The mobility of students within Europe is increasing. Biographies are becoming European. I notice that the unification of final examinations and courses of study in Europe are drawing the continent, the “inventor” of the university, closer together. The success of the Erasmus program shows that there is an enormous interest in this mobility and that the previous national study structures represented a hindrance to the fluctuation of students. Since 1987 almost 2 million people have taken part in the program—with a figure of 3 million students by 2012 being predicted. In the young member states of the European Union (EU), the number of Erasmus students is frequently increasing at a rate of more than 10 percent. At present almost 90 percent of all universities in Europe are involved in the Erasmus program.

It is true, however, that it will become more difficult to swap universities during undergraduate studies, due to the individual curricula adopted for bachelor studies by each university. Such a change to another higher-educational establishment will generally take place after completion of the master's degree. This is the only true disadvantage that I can see in Bologna. Nevertheless, the benefit of being able to take a course of studies from start to finish, that paces one's own competence against the collected intellectual wealth of Europe without any bureaucratic hindrances, to my mind outweighs this disadvantage. And: European universities are urged to design their study programs to be as compatible among each other as possible. This necessity strengthens the need for more cooperation among European universities.

4. One of the theoretical benefits of the classical universities, although rarely taken advantage of, was that of taking part in several courses of study in parallel, or for example, listening in on philosophy lectures while studying business administration. In the words of a one-time president of a university in a large German city, "At our university we have the biggest interfaculty lecture courses *studium generale* on general subjects that one can imagine." Unfortunately, very few students make use of this opportunity. At the same time we sense that the complexity of the problems faced in all areas of life have increased to such an extent that it is no longer sufficient to specialize in a single subject without at least having some sense of how other interconnections might play a role. In other words, the specialist should also be something of a generalist, assuming this facilitates quicker and easier "access" to unknown fields of knowledge.

The restructuring required by Bologna offers the possibility of acquiring specialist knowledge, supported by supplementary fields of knowledge in related subjects; of tying together a package that in this way would already make the transdisciplinary aspects of the basic course of studies a fixed component: interfaculty lectures on general subjects in the arts, that treat ethnic matters as extensions

of the natural sciences, or that permit the learning of economic tools in addition to a core subject in the arts. Entire courses of study would in this way become more transdisciplinary. Specialization during the basic course of studies would be followed—perhaps after a period of practical work—by a master's degree in another subject. Or broadly based bachelor's studies taken in one university would be followed by specialization at the master's level in another European university. And this could all be bound up with a final-qualification offer and language-learning in host countries, where such qualifications and languages are required for a successful career in the fields of science, economics, and society.

5. The Bologna process can finally be seen as a chance for the competitiveness of the European higher-educational sphere in the context of international competition. Bologna will increasingly attract students and professors from throughout the world who are curious about this cradle of the university, and about those who have successfully mastered the balancing act of combining the humanistic tradition with a forward-looking and scholarly society. The Bologna structure allows easier access to worldwide standards—that is, credit points, exams.

The changes provoked by Bologna bring with them enormous challenges for all involved at universities. Professors, students, administration, and management staff are all deeply affected by aspects of the changes taking place. Those running the universities face entirely new challenges previously unknown in the German educational landscape. The university is in the process of changing from a *Wissenschaftsanstalt* grasping at the apron strings of the state to a university with its focus less on process than on results of research, on students, and on successful graduation. And as in the case of state-run bodies and commercial bodies, the university too will require leadership at the top of universities' management.

There will, of course, still be many open questions to be addressed by each university in its own individual way. No consensus has as yet been reached, for example, on whether the bachelor's degree should

be conceived as broad-based—as in the Anglo-Saxon tradition—with specialization taking place at the master’s level, or whether the bachelor should represent a first stage of specialization, this to be based on somewhat more comprehensive studies at the grammar school—or German *Gymnasium*—level. Bologna calls into question the traditional division of the German university landscape into *Fachhochschulen*—less research oriented than universities, more concentration on applied sciences—and *Universitäten*. If both offered bachelor’s and master’s programs, where is the difference anymore?

Revolutions take more than a day. They are processes that require long periods of time. The current frictional loss, uncertainty, enormous efforts and yearning for a return to peace and quiet in Europe’s universities are understandable, and are as normal as they are unavoidable in the face of such extensive upheaval. The important thing, however, is what we will say in ten years’ time, looking back. I feel certain that all of those involved, on looking back, will see the Bologna process as a well-taken opportunity.

THE AGE OF THE UNIVERSITIES

We are living in a period of great confusion. The term can be applied to the multitude of cultures, religions, and colliding social differences in the closest proximity, as well as to the climatic situation and the challenges faced in providing for mankind. The current financial and economic crisis additionally and dramatically confronts universities with two questions.

First, what leaders have the business schools produced over the past decades, and what scholarly findings have they made such that the economy now finds itself in its current situation? What kind of leader must universities educate so that the future will be a better one?

Second, what answers do universities and scholars have to the questions raised by this disoriented society? Where is the path that will take us further?

As you can see, universities find themselves at the heart of society’s most important issues.

As I stated at the outset, I see no serious threat to free inquiry and academic freedom at our universities. What I see is that universities now, more than ever, have the chance and the obligation to discharge their duties at the centre of society. Universities are needed and respected—and with them the principles that I have mentioned. These principles are recognized by society as a whole as the prerequisites for a successful response. The fact that the importance of these principles must repeatedly be elucidated in the normal process of continuous change in our society and its universities goes without saying. This is the age of the universities—now, more than ever. So how do we design our universities? The answer lies in our hands and we bear the responsibility, just as 75 years ago the same sense of responsibility gave rise to the New School.

I look forward to the discussion.

Copyright of Social Research is the property of New School for Social Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.