

Critical Thinking, Democracy, and the University Today: A Central European Perspective

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Abstract

It is assumed here that the university was closely linked with the nineteenth-century political invention of the nation-state and in the last half century it was more and more dependent on the welfare state. Now we are witnessing a major redefinition of the state's responsibilities in the model of the welfare state and a major revision in thinking about the role of the state in politics and economy brought about by globalization processes. The main factors contributing to the need of rethinking higher education institutions today are connected with the globalization pressures. Although CEE countries do not feel them yet, they are likely to be affected by globalization-related processes very soon. Higher education worldwide, including CEE countries, is not a unique part of the public sector anymore. In the CEE countries it is doubly affected: by the local post-1989 transformations and by deeper and long-lasting global transformations. To neglect any of the two levels of analysis is to misunderstand the nature of problems with reforming CEE higher education systems.

I would like to link the question of the role of the university in society and culture today with two parallel processes: first, the questioning of the nation-state in the global age and, second, the gradual decomposition of the welfare state in the majority of OECD countries. The first theme is much more historical and philosophical, the second much more sociological and public policy-oriented. What I assume as the point of departure is that the university in its modern form was closely linked with the nineteenth-century political invention of the nation-state and that the university in the last half century was more and more dependent on the welfare state as it was gradually passing from its elite to the mass (and in current predictions) to near-universal participation model. What happens right now, in very broad terms, is, first, a major redefinition of both the state's responsibilities we are familiar with in the model of the welfare state and, second, a major revision in thinking about the role of the state in contemporary politics and economy brought about by globalization processes and the possible demise of the nation-state. There are few institutions in contemporary world that are affected at the same time by both reconfigurations, for there were few institutions so closely dependent at the same time on the two fundamental paradigms, the nation- and the nation-state. Certainly, the modern German-inspired university in the form we know in Europe (as well as with some modifications in America) is one of them.

It is well-known that hard times have come for higher education all over the world. It is not accidental that following the end of the Cold War, the collapse of Communism, and together with further spread of free-market economy and neo-liberal economic views all over the world, public higher education institutions and the universities in particular are under siege worldwide. Current problems of public higher education are connected with much deeper problems of the public sector in general. Financing and managing higher education institutions was on

reforms and the directions thought about were similar in countries with different political-economic systems and different higher education traditions, not to mention their different technological and civilizational advancement. No matter what fiscal prosperity we could expect – the general conclusion went on in numerous recent educational policy reports – hard times are coming for our educational institutions and their faculty). Budgets are going to squeeze, state support is small and is expected to be even smaller, owing to other huge social needs, universalization of higher education, its expansion in scope, diversity and numbers, and a growing social dissatisfaction with the public sphere in general, higher education included. So the global direction taken by governments worldwide, with huge intellectual backup provided by supranational organizations, is toward a near-universal participation at more and more market-oriented and financially independent institutions of higher education. This direction is nowadays quite explicit.

We have to remember that rethinking the university today is inseparable from rethinking the state today: first, the modern university was put by its German philosophical founders at the disposal of the nation-state, and, second, the university is traditionally a vast consumer of public revenues. And rethinking the state goes in two parallel directions: the nation-state today and the welfare state today. Both ideas are clearly linked with the modern institution of the university, and fundamental reformulations of them will surely affect it. Generally, the state is increasingly seen as a “facilitator”, “regulator”, “partner”, and “catalyst” rather than direct provider of growth or of social services. What it means is a redefinition of state’s responsibilities towards society and high selectivity in activities supported with public funds. “Choosing what to do and what not to do is critical”, as a recent higher education World Bank publication phrases it – and in this context hard times are ahead for higher education worldwide. OECD’s *Redefining Tertiary Education* speaks of a “fundamental shift” and a “new paradigm” of tertiary education for all, as well as about a “historic shift” and a “cultural change”. I fully agree when the report says that “it is an era of searching, questioning, and at times of profound uncertainty, of numerous reforms and essays in the renewal of tertiary education”.

As a result of all these reforms it may happen that certain activities traditionally viewed as belonging to the state’s sphere of responsibilities may not be seen in this way anymore. Higher education is certainly a serious issue in this context, and a general trend towards subsidizing consumers rather than providers, that is to say, students rather than institutions of higher learning (or “the client perspective” in OECD terminology) as well as a shift not only from government, but also from higher education institutions and their faculty to their “client” - is symptomatic. Therefore in my view the significance of transformations of universities in the global age would not be fully captured outside of the context of changes that the economic order, the welfare state and the nation-state currently undergo. One could risk the following statement: in the age of globalization, the national identity ceases to be the most important social glue and therefore its production, cultivation and inculcation – that is, the ideals that stood behind the modern project of the university as conceived by its German intellectual founders – ceases to be a crucial social task. The traditional, modern social mission of the university as an institutional arm of the nation-state has been unexpectedly questioned after two centuries of domination in culture. The university as we know it – the modern university – is in a delicate and complicated position at the

moment: a great cultural project of modernity that has located the university in the very center of culture – in a partner-place for the institution of the nation-state – may be gradually outliving itself. After two hundred years – merely two hundred years! – the great regulatory idea that the university in search of its present *raison d'être* could refer to is no longer known.

So what can the university as an institution propose to society today, in a world that is more and more disenchanting and pluralistic, cosmopolitan, multicultural and multiethnic? Suddenly, after two centuries of standing arm in arm with the nation-state, the modern institution of the university has to look for a new *raison d'être*, new legitimization of its – extremely high – place in culture. Perhaps the university with its capacities of critical thinking could play an important role for instance in supporting (already a bit forgotten) ideals of the civil society? The question arises, who would need these ideals? Surely the society as, paradoxically enough, the society now has no good places to learn them. Surely democracy would need them as well. But how to pass from national ideals to civil ideals that would on principle be deprived of merely local references? The process of passing of American universities from the ideal of (American) culture to the ideal of an increasingly financially independent big (educational) corporation – commonly referred to as its „corporatization“ – is surely not worth being copied without further discussions of its implications in CEE countries. The only question is to what extent there is still a choice in our increasingly homogeneous world. If there was such a choice, the university could become a center for pluralistic, multiperspectival thought that would take care of the ideals of the civil society and democracy in a more and more corporate-like world of global capital.

Thus, generally speaking, in analyzing the changing social, political and economic context of the functioning of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe, a double perspective should be taken into account: a local (post-1989) context and a global one. The issue becomes increasingly important as, following a decade of various attempts at reforms, on the one hand in many CEE countries the system is on the verge of collapse, on the other hand there is an increasing political, economic and social pressure to rethink globally the very foundations of higher education in contemporary societies. The final result of current tensions will inevitably be introducing new laws on higher education and implementing new higher education policies. Consequently, the choice CEE governments face in reforming higher education is of utmost importance for all higher education stakeholders. The impact of transformations will be severe, considering the role higher education currently plays in CEE transition countries and knowledge generally is to play in “knowledge-based societies” about to appear. It is important to move back and forth between the two contexts.

What is often recommended by public policy analysts today is the privatization of public higher education in CEE countries following the introduction of new laws on higher education. Privatization is understood as a gradual process of higher education leaving the public sector of purely state-supported services and moving towards self-sustainability. The degree of privatization may vary, though. The other options – a considerable increase in public spending on higher education, reducing research activities for the sake of maintaining higher level of teaching activities, involving the industry and the military in financing higher education, or merely maintaining the current level of state financing for higher education and at the same time avoiding the collapse of the system – seem more or less unrealistic.

The main factors contributing to the need of rethinking higher education institutions today are connected with the advent of the global economy and with globalization pressures. Although CEE countries do not feel the pressures yet, they will be affected by globalization-related processes very soon. Higher education worldwide, including CEE countries, is not a unique product of the public sector anymore: neither in explicit political declarations, nor in public perception, nor even in practical terms. Higher education in the Region is doubly affected right now: by the local post-1989 transformation and by the local and long-lasting global transformation. To neglect any of the two levels of analysis is to misunderstand the nature of problems with reforming CEE higher education systems. Public higher education in a decade to come is expected to be increasingly focused on teaching rather than research, and on students' needs rather than on academics' needs. There will be a clear shift from the question "what is it that higher education needs from society" to the opposite question "what is it that society needs from higher education". That puts higher education in a new position vis-a-vis society. Within a decade, Central Europe and the Baltics will in most probability be part of the European Union, as will probably be parts of Eastern and South Eastern Europe. It means for them more market-orientation and full exposure to globalization processes, now still seemingly far-away. The fundamental assumption about the globalizing and globalized world is the primacy of economics to politics and culture, and the primacy of the private (sector) to the public (sector) hence the expectance in the CEE countries of a dramatic diminution of the public sector and of the scope of the public services provided by the state. It would mean a totally new working space for the academic profession.

Globalization is the political and economic reality that CEE countries will have to cope with. It will not go away, it will come to the Region, and consequently, public finances, including maintaining public services, will be under increasing scrutiny here, following globalization (meaning: mainly economic pressures and reforming the welfare state worldwide, with significant consequences for the public sector. (Strange as it may sound today, contemporary public policy analysts compare reforming public higher education with reforming the telecommunications sector, telecommunications or the healthcare system. Within a decade in the CEE countries that line of thinking with analogies to other "deregulated" sectors is in most probability be accepted). What is expected is that the ideas of the uniqueness of higher education, and of the university in particular, will finally be rejected.

Thus reinventing higher education in the Region should be accompanied by both conceptualizations and activities of the academy itself, otherwise unavoidable – and necessary – changes will be imposed from the outside anyway. That is where critical thinking is needed. The world is radically changing too. There are no indications that higher education institutions will be spared the consequences; they must be changing radically too. The academy must start thinking about its future drawing on its human resources. Currently, law drafting and discussions about reforms are neglected by the academic community at large. And new laws on higher education rather than corrections to old ones are of utmost importance in necessary current transformations. It would be useful for the academic community to have a comparative view of three legal, economic and cultural contexts in which it used to operate, operates and will operate: from the eighties (communist period), that from the nineties (transition peri-

and that of the beginning of the new century in which still new changes in the three contexts are unavoidable. It would be useful to realize that “things will never be the same”, but also to attempt to envisage how they could actually be.

Rethinking the social, political and cultural consequences of globalization is a crucial task for social sciences today. The decline of the nation-state – even seen as only giving some terrain of power to new transnational political and economic players – is strictly connected with violent globalization processes, which, consequently, should lead to the redefinition of such fundamental notions as democracy, freedom, and politics. It also may lead to the redefinition of the social role of the university. In the situation generated by the emergence of the global market, global economy and the withdrawal of the state called also the decomposition of the welfare state, a constant deliberation is needed about new relations between the state and the university in the global age. For the moment, one of tentative conclusions for me as a policy analyst would be the following: let us not look at higher education issues in isolation from what is going on with the public sphere and with the institution of the state nowadays. These changes do and will influence our thinking about higher education. It is no use keeping referring to the rights gained by the university in modernity (the rights gained in the times of national states) as modernity may be no longer with us. Redefined states may have a bit different obligations, a bit different powers, and it is not quite sure that national public higher education systems, as well as universities, will belong to its most basic sphere of obligations and responsibilities. The state worldwide right now is looking for its own place in a new global order, and higher education issues may seem to it of second importance. It is important to realize that and to use critical thinking inherent to the academic world for the maintenance of democratic values in a changing world.

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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