Editorial

On Scholars, Hippopotami and von Humboldt: Higher Education in Europe in Transition

One of the more endearing characteristics of the scholar — and for that matter, the hippopotamus — is in both cases, their delicate territorial sense. This instinct emerges in the setting of boundaries and marking of territory, intellectual in the case of the former species, interestingly physical in the case of the latter. The techniques each employs differ, of course. Such differences attract, in their turn, the attentions of scholars in other fields — the anthropologist of donnish dominion and disciplines for the first and the students of the late Konrad Lorenz and ethology in the case of the second. Still, such territoriality is a sure pointer to the dynamism of a particular field or, at very least, the wish of individuals working it to assert a special identity, and like the Pharisee, to bolster the claim to be ‘not as other men (or hippopotami) are’.

In economic policy and by extension — although whether that extension is backwards or forwards may be subject to disagreement — in higher education policy, a new term has lit up the landscape. This is the study of ‘Transition Economies’ by which is usually meant those societies and systems of higher education in East and Central Europe, they being in transition from the Ancien Regime and the attendant obscurity of command economies to the blessedly breathable air of the market economy and all that follows therefrom. It is a widely accepted convention.

Yet, for all that, it is a strangely unsatisfactory term for it takes as its principal feature the notion that the phenomenon of transition is unique to Central and Eastern Europe. To claim exclusivity is always a risky business. It could be argued, with no little weight, that the past two decades for Europe as a whole have been a saga of a vast and never-ending transition — to a market economy, to strategic management, to new managerialism, towards the Evaluative State, towards agency control; a veritable procession, a decade or more long, singing songs of expectation, accountability and diversification, variously applied to such areas as funding, students and types of establishment now gathered under the general rubric of ‘higher education’.

Differences Conceptual and Adverbial

There is, of course, the small matter of difference in chronology. With hindsight, we may now see that transition in Western Europe had its roots in the economic crisis of the late 1970s and the break up of what some see as the Social Democrat consensus. The components of dissolution as well as the exact chronology involved in this watershed are discussed by Amaral and Magalhaes in terms of the triple crisis of the university. Dissolved or not, that earlier consensus had a number of solid achievements to its credit, not least that it set higher education in Western Europe on the path towards mass status.

Transition, viewed from this angle, is taken up with the move towards, and the subsequent triumph of, various forms of Neo Liberalism as policy's driving imperative in higher education — as in other spheres. And while demolition of the Berlin Wall is commonly presented as symbolic of the literal fall of the Ancien Regime to the East, there are other more subtle analyses that point to earlier cracks in the façade, as different countries interpreted each in their own way the meaning of Perestroika.

In short, it is not 'transition to' which allows us to identify the specific condition of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. On the contrary, the notion of 'transition to' is better viewed as a perspective that brings the different states and regions of Europe together, although clearly the paths that each chooses to pursue, despite all consultants may do to provide 'reach-me-down' solutions and short cuts, uphold pleasing and challenging differences. Still, there is a certain consolation for the students of transition. They have a stouter defence of their territory provided they define it in terms of 'transition from' rather than 'transition to'. The adverb makes all the difference.

Higher Education and Europe

This number of Higher Education Policy focuses on certain issues that are key in the general 'transition to' a 'European' higher education system. How far it is either accurate or corresponds to grounded reality to view *higher education in Europe* as 'European' remains central, if not quintessential to the whole perspective of 'transition'. Indeed, the connotations of 'higher education in Europe' as opposed to 'European higher education' summarize the two dialectical aspects, which are held in tension within the overall and general notion of 'transition' itself. The former is. The latter — European Higher Education — carries with it overtones of common characteristics, to which governments have subscribed and which increasingly universities are required to show they share. Both transition from and transition to are, of course,

differences in both perspective, prospective and finally, in the particular rhetoric that increasingly tends to surround policy. 'Transition to' is, to use a tortuous Latin construction, 'that which is about to be'. Or that which many hope, pray, write about and prophesy, will be.

One of the great advantages that accompanies the 'transition from' perspective in policy, and it is very far from being negligible, is that we can be pretty sure where we came from. How we re-interpret how we came to be what we are, whether indeed such an interpretation flatters or attacks what we are doing — or propose to do — is a very different matter.

Humboldt and Hagiography

Nybom's article stands, outwardly at least, as a historian's corrective to the life, work and vision of that towering figure in the historiography of the University in Europe, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Nybom's is an unforgiving indictment of the uses — and more often — the distortions that policies, individuals and governments have laid upon the Prussian statesman over the intervening years. Nybom is scathing about the unsavoury conjuring up of Humboldt's ghost to serve as an incantatory devise for policies or reforms that have little or no bearing upon — and appreciation and knowledge even less — of what Humboldt himself advocated. Nybom's analysis illustrates, of course, a very old point, visible as much in contemporary higher education policy as it was in the medieval church.

As with any form of hagiography, problems begin not with the Canonized and Blessed, so much as with the followers, adepts and preachers who interpret his intentions *post mortem*. The difficulties arise not from what he did — although often that is forgotten. Rather they arise from what others hope to do with the examples of wisdom and saintliness they cite to uphold their own purposes, programmes and agendas! It is scarcely surprising that Humboldt the man so rapidly become Humboldt the symbol or even, to take up a point developed by Tomusk in his exploring the fate of private higher education in East and Central Europe, Humboldt as an institution — the merging of the man and his vision.

Yet, the merging of the man and his vision, their institutionalization has formed part of a process which has, over the years, coalesced into a self-defined voluntary identity of higher education by the academic profession around the symbolic significance of von Humboldt. It is a phenomenon both powerful and very far from being uncommon. The prospect of resurrecting the Humboldtian university was one of the more appealing and much-sought-after opportunities that the fall of the Berlin wall held out to an academic profession in Eastern Europe which, for many years, regarded itself as existing in a state of 'inner

exile'. In the immediate aftermath, the Humboldtian myth occupied a rare status, as a shared and common reference point, as a set of values which, because embedded in academia across both East and West, was held to act, potentially at least, as the fulcrum point around which universities in Europe could rally together. Interestingly, from the standpoint of our distinction between Transition to and Transition from, the Humboldtian institution combined both dimensions: the academic vision of universities in East and Central Europe involved — at least briefly — a *retour aux sources* as the future foundation on which inner reform ought to proceed and very particularly, the essential condition of intellectual freedom to teach and to learn.

Arguably, this 'inner strength' of the Humboldtian myth survived longer in the newly liberated systems of higher education of East and Central Europe precisely because of its value as a symbol of resistance and a counterlegitimacy to a political order super-imposed on the university from without.

Humboldt Traduced

Paradoxically, it is very exactly this aspect of Humboldtianism that appears 'illegitimate' to those battling with reforming the university to make it more 'responsive' to change defined externally. Although it is not the main focus of his article, Varia's examination of policies for modernising the Italian university, sheds an interesting light on this recurring theme. It is, of course, a moot point whether the various manifestations and tactics to which, in Varia's account, Italian academia reverted in its opposition government initiatives to overhaul the university may correctly be equated with the finer writings of von Humboldt. What is interesting is that the defence of prior and established practice should be seen as part of the Humboldtian 'ideology' at all, and very especially, as Nybom points out, since the original purpose behind von Humboldt's cogitation was the very opposite of the defence of the established academic order. Baldly stated, if politicians and public representatives may from time to time traduce the thoughts of von Humboldt, they are in good academic company.

New Communities, New problems

That the university has had change brought upon it may appear to some to be the natural consequence of academia's failing to reflect on the increasingly volatile and demanding relationship society expects of it. The question is, and it remains open as never before, to which Community should the university be responsible? De Wit's contribution on the consequences of European integration for higher education examines this in depth.

Certainly, the Nation State is no longer the sole framework within which higher education in Europe operates. And since the Nation State has been the crucible of the modern university, *pace* von Humboldt, this is no minor metamorphosis. Official statements — even remotely enlightening — about the type of Europe to which its universities are contributing, shine by so remarkable absence of penetrability, that even those who welcome the concept of the European University are hard put to grasp their import. At a theoretical level, de Wit outlines the various possibilities that may eventually emerge from the European higher education area. To attempt to fit developments within that area into the framework of such nebulous entities as the ‘network society’ or to argue that European integration is simply a regional equivalent to the broader process of globalization certainly renders us the service of clarity. It imparts some coherence in an otherwise passably confused power struggle between national bureaucracies seeking to preserve their influence and supra-national civil servants seeking to bolster harmony — that is to say, to draw the blanket to their side of the bed!

The Network Society: A Trojan Horse?

However, the ‘network society’ as a political construct is relevant only when we have assured ourselves that as a form of communication and dissemination of knowledge, it is both subject to the responsibility and accountability that today are commonly demanded of universities in other areas of their activity. Once we have embedded the principle of social responsibility to so ephemeral a construct, — assuming that it lends itself to that requirement and this is no small assumption, as de Wit himself recognizes — we have surely to ask ourselves whether it is as effective in meeting the purposes for which communication is established, as those ancient arrangements it replaces? It is all very well to argue that ‘networks’ as opposed to Nations are shaping the curriculum. But if the Nation — that is the public and its general interest — is to have little or no direct say in the valuation of that knowledge which society expects its most responsible citizens to possess, then much of the thrust of reform, accountability and managerial control that European universities took on board in the course of the last decade, melts away like butter in the sun.

Implications

What are the implications the looming network society has for public access to knowledge, or for that matter to our understanding of what knowledge is valued? Are networks the incubators of a new oligarchy? Or are they the technical dimension of a broader and more insidious process, which is already

with us on other fronts, in other forms and in other agendas? How far does the burgeoning of 'knowledge networks' serve to accelerate the transfer of knowledge from the public to the private domain? Are they part of that instrumentality the consequences of which, even if they start there, go far beyond the technical and which bring in their train one of the most significant shifts in the valuation of knowledge since the rise of 'scientific knowledge' in the 17th and 18th centuries? That is to say, its ethical re-definition no longer in terms of a gift relationship between generations and which humanity makes to itself but rather as a good, to be controlled by the few — via networks — to be purchased by those who can afford it — via universities virtual in everything, but virtuous in nothing. Network society combined with the commodification of knowledge is, potentially, a formidable device for exclusion, and for reducing the achievements of democracy to a shell. It is all the more powerful for the fact that so far, the political and cultural framework that Europe seeks to develop seems to possess neither appeal nor clarity to its peoples — and for that reason is unable to counterbalance the vision of Europe as a market by the vision of Europe as a vibrant cultural force.

Some argue that universities should give more thought to how they are to serve the world beyond the gates of academe. Others, like Navarro and Gallardo in this issue, seek to improve the techniques and instruments that will allow that purpose to be met. However, so long as the vision of what that world should be — apart from a vast trading area — remains subject to persistent and barely disguised disagreement among the highest in the land — it is hardly surprising at all that the only vision the universities of Europe may cultivate at present embraces the commercial and economic as policy's equivalent of a lowest common denominator.

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