EVERYONE'S BELOVED MUSE: ONCE AGAIN, EXPLORING EDUCATION

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SUMMARY. Universities have always been part of political and public discourse in one way or another. The EU has assigned universities a new model role as *ultimate integrators* for the designated European Education Area and European Research Area. In this sense, Homo Academicus must reflect on new arrangements, as the previously occupied position of an omniscient detached observer is no longer valid. It is doomed to remain an unaccomplished and misleading idealization. The European Council has introduced the idea of the *European University* as a bottom-up network of universities across the EU. It presents education as everyone's favorite muse, but it is not a silver bullet. The education system is entangled in national and supranational interests, constantly shifting between the public and private sectors. The academic community is experiencing one of the biggest existential conflicts in choosing between two options: 1) scholastic supra-civic detachment, *ivory tower* escapism, and elitist stance, or 2) intellectual social engagement and civic education. Unless this conflict is resolved, future universities will not be able to foster transversal skills and prepare accountable citizens.

KEYWORDS: relative autonomy, European University, critical thinking, civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The education system, particularly its significant pillar – universities – has always been a topic of political and public discourse in one way or another. To rephrase the words of Douglass, King, and Feller (2009), this suggests the modern fortune of education – to become everyone's beloved muse. In connection with this, an intriguing educational development is unfolding in Europe. The EU has designated universities with a new model role as the *ultimate integrators* for the European Education Area and European Research Area. The underlying political ambition is the consolidation of the EU into a more integrated body, free from the symptoms of the *unidentified political object* as previously indicated by former President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors (The European Community 1985, Zielonka 2010). Just like the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this development is expected to serve as an initiator that may activate

Monnet's integration method through the necessity to act. "I knew from experience that change can only come from outside, under the pressure of necessity, although not necessarily by violent means" (Monnet 1978: 286). However, despite these political objectives, every education system must prepare highly competent graduates. Most discussions about education tend to focus on employability and critical thinking, creating a distinction between efficient/productive employees and responsible/accountable citizens. Others attempt to mediate and balance this binary opposition through a strong belief in creativity and innovation. This paper aims to contribute to these discussions by contrasting the EU's education policy and its philosophical context.

SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY AND HOMO ACADEMICUS

To reassess the social role of educational institutions, let us briefly reflect on scientific communities and their link with society. The scientific method and its procedural universality are expected to be applicable to both the social and physical realms. However, the philosophy of science and sociology of science have suggested certain diverging aspects. For example, Popper's (2008 [1963]) and Lakatos' (1999 [1976]) concepts of falsification and research programs have embraced anti-dogmatism, the boldness of hypotheses, and the logical framework of scientific growth. Kuhn's (1996 [1962]) paradigm has emphasized the role of *normal* science as an important prerequisite to discontinuous and disruptive changes in terms of paradigm shift (like sociological-religious conversion). Both schools of thought had their own similarities and differences, which were equally challenging and interesting.

Moreover, Popper and Kuhn primarily relied on physics as an exemplary science to explain their understanding of scientific discoveries. In this regard, both philosophers encountered difficulties when it came to social studies. Following the remarks of sociologist Elias (2009b, 2009d), Popper and Kuhn were too preoccupied with logical and historical *purism*. They overlooked social *sciences* that were yet to mature. The notion of maturity itself is questionable because it automatically imposes an idealized view of science resembling classical physics (Redman 1993). The Newtonian framework implied a detached mode of observation, contributing to the standard of objectivity. However, Elias rejected the idea of absolute detachment, thereby preserving the epistemic link between knowledge and knowers. His key concept of relative autonomy (Elias 2009a) serves as a fundamental principle for functional scientific establishments (Elias 2009c). Scientific communities cannot function as detached centers of scientific expertise solely focused on the growth

(or production) of knowledge. Institutional and intellectual autonomy cannot be defined independently from the social and political context.

From a contemporary perspective, even the postmodernist provocateur Bourdieu (2004) now seems like a naive formalist. He insisted on maintaining clear boundaries between political and scientific fields. Nowadays, public discourse is imbued with blurred lines. Similarly, Feyerabend (1999 [1976]) drew an analogy between scientific communities and organized crime. His principle of a*nything goes* is combined with a survivalist strategy – playing as undercover agents amidst affective clashes involving scientific propaganda and coercion (Feyerabend 2010). Schumpeter (2009 [1954]) also remarked that scientific communities tend to evolve into socioeconomic groups for a variety of reasons, which are not limited to professional competence or incompetence. While Feyerabend endorsed political interventions into scientific activities for the sake of democracy (according to him, only politically tamed science could be society-friendly), Schumpeter supported interdisciplinary balance with necessary precautions – "cross-fertilization might easily result in cross-sterilization" (2009 [1954]: 27). All these reflections and references point to the persistent gap between the ideal image of the scientific community and the existing practices of scholarship. Every choice of direction for intellectual and professional development must contend with this discrepancy.

For the sake of clarity, let us establish a figurative person, *Homo Academicus*, as the target of current criticism and the starting point for further discussion. Like *Homo Economicus* and *Homo Politicus*, this explanatory model of behavior reduces the complexity of reality into a limited set of parameters or recreates a *one-dimensional* human portrayal with specific self-interest. For example, *Homo Economicus* refers to the existential mode within the economic dimension, while *Homo Politicus* operates within the political one. *Homo Academicus* can be seen as the result of the most effective reduction, transcending dimensions, and achieving its own perfection – the point. It is akin to a mathematical point in Euclidean geometry, a primitive mathematical notion that cannot be defined in terms of previously defined objects and lacks length, area, volume, or any other dimensional attribute. In this sense, *Homo Academicus* assumes the omniscient viewpoint of a detached observer (like a divine position). However, it is destined to remain an unaccomplished and misleading idealization. Isolated settings and professional specialization can be associated with scientific institutions on isolated islands, akin to places of punishment in the social dystopia of *Brave New World* – "t's lucky that there are so many islands in the world. I don't know what we would do without them. Put you all in the lethal chamber..." (Huxley 2020 [1932]). Future universities will need to integrate *Homo Academicus* into greater social engagement.

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY AND SOCIETY

The European Council has introduced the idea of the European University as a bottom-up network of universities across the EU (The European Council 2017). It represents a higher level of collaboration than the usual Erasmus exchange or joint-degree study programs. This strategic alliance would enable student mobility within the network using the European Student Card, essentially making the European University their home institution. The European Commission (2019a) has selected 17 European University alliances involving 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States in response to the first call. According to the press release (The European Commission 2019a), the European University is expected to become an inter-university campus "around which students, doctoral candidates, staff, and researchers can move seamlessly." In addition to providing joint curricula and access to expertise, platforms, and resources, there is a strong emphasis on local and regional engagement to apply scientific knowledge in practical ways. The European Universities initiative is also part of regional development policy, encouraging students and researchers to collaborate with local municipalities and businesses. In the second call, the European Commission (2020a) selected 24 new European Universities, involving 165 higher education institutions from 26 Member States and other participating countries in the Erasmus+ program. According to a survey mentioned in the press release (The European Commission 2020a), over 60% of the first 17 European Universities believe that the initiative has already helped address the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The creation of virtual inter-university campuses is cited as one of the successful examples. Although it is still unclear how regions will benefit from this initiative, there are potentially positive outcomes to be expected. However, there is a matter of concern, particularly for Eastern European institutions. A closer look at the annexes (The European Commission 2019b, 2020b) reveals some inconvenient statistics. Out of the 114 institutions from the first call, only 23 universities are from Eastern Europe. The same situation applies to the second call, where out of the 165 institutions, only 38 universities are from Eastern Europe. This indicates an existing gap, although the European University initiative strives to be inclusive in its efforts, if not in numbers. Hopefully, positive results can be achieved through collaboration between political and academic leadership.

Nevertheless, there is a significant amount of intellectual criticism and caution regarding education and universities. Such concerns should not be dismissed as a traditional adherence to privileges or a conservative fear of impending changes. Universities are not the only institutions that cultivate comfort zones. More fundamental challenges for society are emerging from the fog of "post-truth." In this

regard, universities appear to be both a symptom, a problem, and a solution simultaneously – a nightmare for any political mentality, as surgical precision is not applicable under these conditions. The concept of absolute autonomy for universities has never been feasible. Institutional and epistemic autonomies are relative concepts, and scientific establishments and communities are interconnected within the social fabric. From a sociological perspective, knowledge is never independent of the knowers. This means that there is no barrier between the *subject* and the *object* (Elias 2009a, 2009b). Relative epistemic autonomy also shapes institutional settings. Scientific communities, society, and the state form an interdependent social and political complexity. Education policy requires special sensitivity and understanding of epistemic and social discourses. It is a challenging task for decision-makers to strike the right balance between technical formalisms, the language of policy initiatives, and long-term expectations. The European University initiative should not be immune to critical considerations.

The European Commission's communication (2020c) identifies a major shortcoming of the Erasmus+ program (alongside examples of success) – only 5% of students have had the opportunity to benefit from Erasmus+ advantages. Therefore, it is expected that the European University initiative, with 41 (forty-one) alliance pilots across the EU, will generate more experimentation and testing data for new models of deeper and more ambitious cooperation. The key objective is to establish the European Education Area by 2025. A common issue with policy initiatives is that they are often designed within political-administrative frameworks, where practical problems and solutions can become overshadowed by technical jargon. So far, it is encouraging to find certain observations made on an institutional level, such as "across Europe, the educational experiences of individuals follow social patterns" (The European Commission 2020c). Furthermore, the EU Commission (2020c) acknowledges that education is failing to reduce inequalities linked to socioeconomic status. Even though regulations may seem to declare otherwise, the highest-performing universities still struggle to adopt an egalitarian agenda. The harmonization of scientific excellence and social egalitarianism is crucial for the future of democracy and serves as a fundamental purpose of universities.

Prospective graduates are expected to contribute to sustainable social development. But what does this worn-out phrase mean? What forms of contribution lead to societal well-being? How do we define societal well-being? The pursuit of answers to these questions may result in unproductive spin-offs or other intellectual and political minefields. Administrative projects often suffer from an unspecified overlap between policy and politics. This condition of fuzziness is a constant feature of democratic governance, despite attempts by executive agencies to formally delineate the separation. Education systems are continuously embedded in

this state of ambiguity, where issues of institutional engagement and autonomy persist. Universities must respond to the volatile social complexities arising from intertwined interests. However, the problem of institutional survival should not overshadow the primary mission of universities. Students are not limited resources for universities to compete for in the supposed market of knowledge production. It is the graduates who determine the success or failure of the education system. Their ability to navigate their personal and professional lives is linked to critical self-reflection on their own social and political agency. The European University initiative emphasizes the value of transversal skills, including critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity, and civic engagement, fostered through transdisciplinary, learner-centered, and challenge-based approaches (The European Commission 2020c). While this appears promising, the final evaluation will depend on the results of practical implementations. For now, a few points remain for cautious and constructive criticism, as there is always a risk that transversal skills will be marginalized on the agenda. Firstly, the European University initiative has maintained previous top-down aspirations of diversity management, with a narrow focus on multilingualism and cultural diversity studies. This institutional approach tends to reduce the humanities to a philological/linguistic framework in favor of social and political sciences. Secondly, the highest priority is given to cutting-edge scientific disciplines and technologies such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and high-performance computing. This is understandable, as the future is digital. Consequently, transversal skills are not adequately positioned within this framework. Being a puzzling notion, they often get lost in the gap between institutional inertia and future-oriented digital enthusiasm. It is common for pressing problems to require immediate attention, and our institutions are not always adept at addressing them.

THE EU'S EDUCATION POLICY AND FUZZINESS

The education system has remained an area of national responsibility for the EU Member States. In parallel, it is a key part of the European integration framework. Member States expect education to be a driving force for the twin transition – the Green and Digital. The EU institutions view the European Education Area as contributing to the geopolitical standing of the EU itself (The European Commission 2020c). It makes education everyone's favorite muse but is not necessarily a silver bullet. The education system is immersed among national and supranational interests, and it is being shifted between the public and private sectors. Fuzziness is a quite accurate analytical term for such a setting (Sundell & Teivo 2017). From an

optimistic point of view, it should expand cooperation and increase innovative opportunities with benefits for all sides. However, power is not equally distributed in this *best of all possible worlds*.

Sundell and Teivo (2017) have published a revealing analysis of the situation at the University of Helsinki. They have targeted the problem of fuzzy (creeping) privatization by applying a distinction between privatization in public education (endogenous privatization) and privatization of public education (exogenous privatization). The outcome of fuzzy privatization is an institution that cannot be clearly defined as *private*. In this case, the university operates as a public institution with imported practices of private business management, which is based on the alleged existence of educational markets. The research has reached a disturbing conclusion, i.e., "references to the university being increasingly private, financially autonomous, and economically responsible become justificatory tools for dismantling democratic elements of the university's decision-making system" (Sundell & Teivo 2017: 79).

The other aspect of fuzziness refers to the shifting role of the nation-state in education. Since the middle of the 20th century, the educational system has undergone many changes at an accelerated pace. Especially higher education has been influenced by increasing globalization and the expanding neoliberal agenda. Universities are applying new modes of operation under new circumstances of privatization, internationalization, diminishing borders between *public* and *private*, etc. This induces alterations of academic norms and professional ethics, prioritizing market competitiveness. The whole era of deregulation may suggest that the nation-state is retreating from higher education. However, Buckner (2017) considers a more complicated picture. She has employed quantitative content analysis of over 700 UNESCO publications, thus exploring international higher education development discourse. The role of the nation-state is re-articulated, and the intersection of older and newer logics (national vs. global, public vs. private) still stimulates the search for new conceptual relationships (Buckner 2017: 487). According to Buckner (2017), it is unclear how students are affected by changing ideas because the analyzed discourse mainly depends on the institutional setting. Reflective discussions about students' experience of this fuzziness should enhance our understanding of what is happening with democracy in these times of *post-truth*.

CRITICAL THINKING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This is a longstanding mission assigned to universities: to foster critical thinking and prepare students as prospective citizens. Such an educational program must be

preconditioned by the notion of political agency. The present fuzziness distorts the democratic canon of *political*, and higher education provides a favorable environment for that trend. This is not a new problem from a historical and philosophical perspective. Ancient Greek philosophy, as a system of thought or the study of fundamental questions, originated in opposition to sophistry, which is training in manipulative argumentation. We are experiencing the golden age of sophistry as it has entered public discourse in a political and economic sense. The demise of philosophy's epistemic monopoly is explained by the rise of natural and social sciences. Besides that, philosophy must address the issues regarding the legacy of medieval scholasticism, which conditions the educational system as well.

As pointed out by Dewey (1997 [1910], 1929), Aristotelian teaching has produced longstanding unresolved contradictions. Dewey (1997 [1910]) has reapplied Aristotle's saying that an individual who is not a member of a state is either a brute or a god. However, Aristotle has identified the chief virtue as pure thought, with something isolated from social life like the divine, which implies a godlike human being as someone non-social and supra-civic (Dewey 1997 [1910]). This has imposed a distinction between theory and practice, with priority given to the former as a sort of higher reality concerning practice as a lower reality. But this division is not an original *achievement* of philosophy. Dewey (1929) has emphasized the importance of the social/cultural context, which influences the formulation of intellectual ideas.

It is possible to employ the Aristotelian framework both as a historical explanation and an analytical tool for current issues – all we need to do is consider the present context and its social evolution. For example, Aristotle's famous definition of a human as a *political animal* is still a relevant analytical concept (Ober 2013). *Political animal* refers to a human definition that suggests civic engagement in a polis-type community or state. The prevalent forms of civic engagement indicate a quality of political robustness within society. The beginning of the 21st century marks two main shifts: 1) the ongoing competition between old and new logics, or national and supranational institutions (in the context of globalization), and 2) the turn to affect, intellectual/political rebellion against discourse and ideology (Leys 2011). The affective polarization and its impact on democracy have attracted much attention recently. The intensity of polarization and altered spaces for civic engagement amplify another kind of mentality – the *party animal*. The *party animal* disregards community interests and misrepresents the idea of civic engagement. This type of political mentality distinguishes itself by extreme in-group loyalty (to the party) and dehumanizing out-group intolerance (towards political opponents) (Martherus et al. 2021).

Not surprisingly, the academic community is experiencing one of the biggest existential conflicts in choosing between two options: 1) scholastic supra-civic detachment, *ivory tower* escapism, and an elitist stance, or 2) intellectual social engagement and civic education. Unless this conflict is resolved, future universities will not be able to foster transversal skills and prepare accountable citizens.

CONCLUSION

"The interconnection between knowledge and power has become something of a cliché in recent decades, embodied in the notion of the knowledge economy – a curious conflation of omniscience and omnipotence that feeds fantasmatic illusions of becoming masters of our own destiny through education, thus reproducing docile educational subjectivities" (Clarke 2017: 69). There is no doubt that universities are highly efficient in *knowledge production* (including marketable knowledge), though knowledge is power, and power corrupts. We risk losing our connection to social reality while chasing a pseudo-political one. As indicated by Roth (2015), universities are infected with a confident refusal to be affected by disagreements. "In training our students in the techniques of critical thinking, we may be giving them reasons to remain guarded – which can translate into reasons not to learn" (Roth 2015: 184). Education must remain a viable part of democratic culture amid technology-oriented transitions. Certainly, universities alone will not be able to meet the challenges on a societal level, but they should be more committed to the cause of an inclusive public space.

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VISŲ MYLIMA MŪZA: VĖL TYRINĖJAME ŠVIETIMĄ

SANTRAUKA. Universitetų tematika visada buvo svarbi politinių ir viešųjų diskusijų dalis. Europos Sąjunga (ES) universitetams numato naują pavyzdinį „būtinų konsoliduotųjų" vaidmenį kuriamoje Europos švietimo ir Europos mokslinių tyrimų erdvėje. Šiuo požiūriu *Homo academicus* turi apsvarstyti naujas situacijas, nes anksčiau užimta visa žinančio nuotolinio ir nešališko stebėtojo pozicija tampa nebeaktuali. Ji vis labiau panašėja į neišsipildžiusią ir klaidinančią idealizaciją. Europos Taryba pristatė „Europos universiteto" idėją kaip universitetų tinklą visoje ES. Metaforiškai žvelgiant, švietimas traktuojamas kaip visų mėgstamiausia mūza, tačiau tai nėra visiems priimtina panacėja sprendžiant socialines problemas. Švietimo sistemoje visąlaik pinasi nacionaliniai ir supranacionaliniai interesai, o riba tarp viešojo ir privataus sektorių tampa vis labiau neskaidri. Akademinė bendruomenė susiduria su vienu didžiausių egzistencinių iššūkių, kai tenka rinktis iš dviejų strategijų: 1) scholastinio atsiribojimo nuo visuomenės, eskapizmo ir elitizmo ar 2) intelektualinio socialinio įsitraukimo ir pilietinio ugdymo. Jei ši kolizija nebus išsispręsta, universitetai ateityje tiesiog negalės lavinti tarpdisciplininių bei kritinių įgūdžių ir ugdyti atskaitingų piliečių.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: santykinė autonomija, Europos universitetas, kritinis mąstymas, pilietinis įsitraukimas.