

THE UNIVERSITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY : AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

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The Bologna Process and Beyond

TOWARDS 2010 : THE UNIVERSITIES' ROLE IN BUILDING THE EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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Excerpt : The signing of the *Magna Charta* in 1215, of the *Bologna Declaration* in 1999, the setting up of the *European Higher Education Area* by 2010 are but stages in the process of European integration. They focus on the university, an institution considered to be the common blood of the continent, the revealer of its unity. The *Magna Charta Universitatum* defined the shared references that make the identity of the university – after 900 years of history – both an institution *of* the world and *in* the world. This means academic freedom, institutional autonomy and accountability, that is the responsibility to society both of academics as individuals and of the university as a collective. Thus the European Ministers of Education in Prague, Berlin or Bergen reaffirmed the university to be a *public good*, an institution offering a public service – in short, a shaper of our communities' political organisation. Ministers now challenge universities to respond to social needs, for example in meeting the Lisbon objectives that, by 2010, should make of Europe the most vibrant society in the use of knowledge. Respond, yes ... but how ? As a tool of change – by being *responsive* - or as an actor for change – by being *responsible*. *Responsiveness* is the elbow margin of servants given objectives to be met as efficiently as possible. *Responsibility* builds on the freedom to choose - *and to err* – which is the *sine qua non* of liberty: then, it is possible to stand for one's choices. The universities are *of* the world when they CONSENT to the social order of the day, thus helping continue society through the training of its elites and the qualifying of its human resources ; they are *of* the world also when they develop ideas to shape products and services intended for community well-being. The universities are *in* the world when they take distance from on-going urgencies either to explore the unknown – usually by DISSENTING from prevailing understandings of reality – or to re-arrange the known to offer people and society a new sense of direction, different meanings of their place in the universe. When *of* the world, they are responsive – a tool in transformations decided from outside; when *in* the world, they are responsible – a partner in the definition of tomorrow's society. Both consent and dissent are desirable features of the university. Indeed, their combination is what makes the university a unique institution for the development of society. However, these four functions, the searches for *order* and *well-being*, on the side of consent, and the searches for truth and meaning, on the side of dissent, are often confused in the daily life of academic institutions. And the danger, for 2010 and the European Higher Education Area, is for the universities to make of the *Bologna process* a list of objectives to be met – so that the higher education machine works more efficiently (better qualifications based on more compatible teaching structures linked by a common system of credits) – rather than a forum where universities with their social partners can invent a Europe of responsible citizens and institutions. The risk is to fall into the temptation of the 'how' rather than facing the 'why' of an integrated society, in other words to project old recipes of nation-building on the European project – a responsive attitude – rather than keeping the future of Europe open by preparing for the unexpected – a responsible behaviour. Defining the latter is the role of the Magna Charta Observatory founded five years ago in the same buildings where the conference meets today.

1. From 1988 to 2010, historical developments

The European civil society does not exist yet – as such. Civil society has developed over the last two centuries, indeed, and, since the French Revolution, people have slowly enlarged their individual rights – from equality to free expression, from association to suffrage, from work to integrity. And these common features of citizenship have been recognised by the 1948 *Human Rights Convention* signed by the many countries of Europe. This document framed the development of civil society in the various nations of the region. States remain the centres of power even if they recognise a Court in Strasbourg to enforce compatibility of treatment. People, however, are rarely aware of the European dimension of their life – even if, in their purses, they share a common currency, the Euro. But this is true for a small number of countries only. As a matter of fact, Europe is and remains a patchwork of allegiances focused on national

administrative procedures: the movement towards European integration is still far from having reached its post-war ideals.

Universities represent the only institutions that, for centuries, have grown on similar lines all over the continent. In the 19th and 20th century, for instance, they all shared in the building of nations, in the modernisation of economies and societies, in the innovation process stimulated by the curiosity for the unknown as well as by war and competition. They all developed from small élite institutions to centres of mass education that use the same scientific and cultural references for the transformation of their communities. They all went through similar problems when, in their organisation, they moved from administration to management or, now, to governance models. In fact, universities are so similar as to have a common European identity – although they often ignore it !

Uncovering this European belonging – beyond national borders and customs – is at the core of the integration movement linked to the name of Bologna – referred to as the *Alma Mater* of European universities : this was expressed both in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* of 1988 and the *Bologna Declaration* of 1999. The two documents point to a common future for all institutions of higher learning, the *European Higher Education Area* – which is due to be completed in 2010, four years from now.

In 1988, universities recognised their common belonging, the principles they share to base the norms of their activities in teaching and research, in other words the ideals that shape their European identity: this identity consists in being platforms of social and scientific innovation secured by the academic freedom of individuals, on one side, and by the autonomy of institutions dealing as ‘collectives’ with political, social and economic partners, often their paymasters, on the other. The *Magna Charta* was an exercise in self-awareness sanctioned by the signature of now more than 500 university leaders. This text soon became a reference on the duties and privileges that make universities unique in the landscape of higher education.

In 1999, the initiative passed on to the governments of Europe when they wished to clean up the university system from the national idiosyncracies that, in the region, made difficult if not hopeless academic cooperation and communication - despite the institutions’ obvious commonalities of purpose and development. Thus 31 Education Ministers representing 29 European countries signed a declaration of intent outlining the six areas where convergence of programmes and rules could be developed (two tier structures of learning, European credit system, quality assessment, diploma supplement, etc ...). These represented the tools governments AND universities were recommended to use together in order to build by 2010 a common academic space in Europe – now extended to 45 countries from Iceland to Malta, from Russia to the Holy See or from Portugal to Turkey.

If in 1988 the universities were challenging public authorities to recognise their specificity as European actors of change, in 1999, the governments challenged the universities to express the common identity they were claiming in the development of their programmes and services for European citizens. In terms of European integration, the idea was that Europe would be taken for granted by its inhabitants when they could learn, teach, search and debate in a borderless academic space – like the one in the United States. 1988, 1999 and 2010 are thus stages of a single process leading to a civil society conscious of its European identity and shared belonging.

2. *Universities for Europe – a public good*

Over the last two centuries, the universities in Europe have certainly been agents of nationhood and social development. For a good part of the 20th century, this went as far as indoctrination in Central and Eastern Europe where higher education had to show the direction of history and the meaning of collective belonging in order to achieve the aims of a new society. Academic institutions had to provide social cohesion. Without going so far, most universities in other countries were also perceived to be tools of shared well-being, in other words a *public good*, a *res publica*, i.e. an important key to the growth of civil society. That is why the *Magna Charta* calls for the accountability of universities in their commitment to civil growth or social transformation. That is also why the Education Ministers, when meeting in Prague in 2001, ‘supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility, and that students are full members of the higher education community’. Two years later, in Berlin, Ministers added: ‘We reaffirm the importance of the social dimension of the

Bologna process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. They emphasise that, in international academic cooperation and exchanges, academic values should prevail'.

In short, students are no customers nor clients of higher education : they are full partners in the shaping of the academic community they belong to. In this context, profit is considered secondary to the intellectual values the university is called to promote in society. As a consequence, money should not represent an obstacle to education and mobility. Moreover, the university is to contribute to social cohesion, a prime political objective of governments in Europe – especially considering the very different stages of economic welfare the 45 member countries of the EHEA are in.. In other words, universities should help *level the field of intellectual opportunities* rather than build on increased differentials of knowledge. If not equality, at least equity should be at the core of the European academic project – with the full support of the public authorities, at national and at European level. This ‘social dimension’ – added to the Bologna declaration in 2001 and confirmed in 2003 – reflected the students’ persuasive power when, in Prague, they became full members of the Bologna follow up group that steers the process of academic convergence in Europe, a group that brings together representatives of Ministries, the Council of Europe, UNESCO-CEPES – on the governmental side - and of university and student organisations, on the non-governmental side. In 2005, at Bergen, the latter were joined by representatives of the employers’ association and of the teacher unions, thus completing the group of stakeholders in higher education supposed to help Europe to build its identity using the universities. The group meets every six months – under the leadership of the country in charge of the EU Presidency – now Austria - while its smaller executive meets more often to launch joint studies and to coordinate the many conferences and symposia that the countries offer to hold in order to reflect on topics of common interest in view of the setting up of the European Higher Education Area. Recently, the Holy See organised such a conference on the role of universities in transmitting European culture; other example, next month, in June, the Council of Europe will host a meeting on the responsibility of educational institutions in a democratic society. Other sessions deal with quality, qualification, curricula, languages and diversity, etc. The results of these many sessions feed into the Ministerial conferences, London hosting the next one in 2007. The unique feature of the Bologna process is the continued presence of both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to discuss together the potential of university activities in the development of all aspects of European specificity – to uncover the Europe that exists already beyond curriculum development, accreditation or qualification that are but instruments for the wider purpose of European integration. Thus, the Bologna process is becoming an effort at creating a European model of knowledge exploration and transfer which all partners can feel to belong to.

3. *Responsive or/and responsible institutions*

The public responsibility of governments holding together the national communities they steer echoes the universities’ public responsibility in shaping society – through teaching, research, learning and service. Reading EU documentation or OECD papers, it seems that academic institutions are again recognised to be key actors for the *exploration, innovation, assimilation and activation* of the knowledge that leads to a ***coherent, cohesive and sustainable society***. In April last year, for instance, the Commission in Brussels published a communication on ‘*Mobilising the brainpower of Europe by enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*’. It was a call to financing more and better ‘*the modernisation and quality of universities as a direct investment in the future of Europe and the Europeans*’. But political prioritisation – next to money - is not enough to have universities help Europe turn into the most vibrant region of the world in terms of the knowledge society, the so-called Lisbon objectives that should also be achieved by 2010. Countries and institutions have also to become aware that the system of higher education suffers from *insufficient differentiation*, from *insularity*, from *overregulation* and from *underfunding* (universities being at the crossroad of two investment deficits, on research AND on higher education – each requiring in reference cases some 3% of the GDP).

To counter such deficits – and deficiencies – universities and governments, according to the EU Commission, should insist on the ‘*imperative of quality and excellence*’ – which means flexibility, openness, broader access and better communication. To favour these qualities, ‘*a better system of institutional management*’ is required; indeed, says the Communication, ‘*universities are calling for a fundamentally new type of arrangement (or ‘contract’) with society, whereby they are responsible and accountable for their programmes, staff and resources while public authorities would only focus on the strategic orientation of the system as a whole*’. For the Magna Charta, this equals to a redefinition of autonomy on functional lines. Autonomy, as a result, becomes the ability to be different, to develop a unique profile, to prove entrepreneurship. For the authorities, a little on the model of the Bologna dialogue, this means to establish **new partnerships** with higher education institutions ‘*encouraging university leadership to undertake genuine change and pursue strategic priorities*’.

Interestingly enough, however, the Commission in this text deals with the universities as tools that can be used better and whose efficiency as knowledge providers should be improved – as if the key to change was a simple reaction to a given situation. Official literature, today, constantly speaks of *responsiveness* – which is the elbow margin usually left to servants required to meet a specific goal, for instance to produce a given object in as efficient a way as possible. They certainly have some say on the ways and means of their action but little on the reasons for it. The word *responsibility* has but disappeared of governmental texts when speaking of universities. Is it because *responsibility* builds on the freedom to choose – **and to err** – which is the *sine qua non* of liberty? Then, and only then, it becomes possible to stand for one’s choices, to be accountable partners in the shaping of social development. Indeed, if they are to differentiate, to open to new ideas and partners, to show flexibility and effectiveness, the universities should be relied upon as pro-active partners that can help transcend given situations of unpredictability since they represent communities whose talent and leadership in knowledge creation must be unleashed – should Europe strengthen its own future.

In a way, the dominant discourse takes higher education and research as activities that are endowed with local or regional infrastructures – in terms of building, places and laboratories specialising in the domains that make the focuses of national development. The particular contribution of academic actors to the success of those disciplines is not really analysed in depth, however. In other words, universities are much more perceived as instruments for the construction of a desired future rather than as partners in the definition and invention of that future, i.e., as the catalysts of the dynamics of change and discovery that knowledge implies.

4. A dual accountability : consent and dissent

In the context of today’s conference on *The University and Civil Society*, the *Magna Charta* would like to point to the importance of making the difference between *responsiveness* and *responsibility* when discussing the role of higher education in the many fields of social commitment that will be addressed over the next two days. When trying to understand what makes the university a university, the *Observatory* tends to consider unique to the academic institution the mix and cohabitation of these two approaches, the responsive – that evokes *consent* –, and the responsible one – that supposes *dissent*. When fulfilling some basic social functions, the university does not only agree to but supports and reproduces the community arrangement of the day. For instance, when it qualifies students, it puts graduates on the social ladder, who, often, will have difficulties to move upward from one rung to the next – at least in Europe. That is why so many parents are terribly keen to have their children get a diploma – much more than an education. This corresponds to the function of social reproduction that is fundamental to collective survival. Research for development. – as well as social relevance in the training for various vocations – are also areas that do not require questioning the system: the idea is to make society progress in terms of wealth and organisation, a material progress judged in function of stable and predictable criteria. Other basic functions, however, require taking some distance from the knowledge of the day, questioning it in order to go forward. Thus, each generation re-arranges the *already known* to adapt it to its own purpose, setting it in new perspectives, changing its priorities, thus giving unexpected meaning to the treasures of wisdom accumulated by mankind. This could be called ‘scholarship’: it helps people and groups to find a sense of direction, i.e., meaning. Feeding on the unknown, ‘rolling back the frontiers of

ignorance' also questions accepted theories : this is the basis for research understood as curiosity driven innovation that transcends the obvious.

Synergies between these various approaches call for a unique combination of tradition and innovation. In many civilisations, the searches for order and for welfare – that dwell on consent –, and the searches for meaning and truth - that live on dissent – are spread among different institutions like schools, laboratories, academies or learned societies. In Europe, the traditional university combines them all, living on the tensions between dissent and consent, thus holding together contradictory social functions. That is why Vaclav Havel considered a judicious etymology of the word *uni-versitas* to be 'turning to the one'. *AD UNUM VERTERE* could express the specificity of knowledge dynamics at the university. To house these tensions and outlive these contradictions, however, the institution needs indeed protective and supporting devices – academic freedom for its individual members and institutional autonomy for itself, as a collective. Thus, governing the university means allowing for consent and dissent to combine in people, projects and activities – which implies academic freedom – but not to fall into disruption and fragmentation – hence the need for autonomy, which is the capacity to move by oneself as an institution, in other words to be responsible and stand for its choices in a given social context. This could be called 'dual accountability' – which, in theological terms, would amount to be *of* the world (consent) and *in* the world (dissent), both at the same time. The resulting contract with outside powers asks for special trust and confidence between the government and the university so that the tensions do not turn the university either into a bomb – or into a useless void – but rather into a crucible of possible social changes and adaptation, making it some kind of laboratory of the future. This means empowering the academic institution for the unpredictable – a key area for society's risk taking.

5. *The Bologna process : risks and opportunities for the European civil society*

Autonomy and Responsibility : this is certainly a key issue for the sectors of higher education and research as well as for governments and other stakeholders, all referred to as autonomous and responsible partners in the making of society, both in Europe and beyond. The Bologna process represents a fantastic opportunity for change in Europe as it mixes - around the same objective and with the same time deadline - all university stakeholders seen as *partners* in the transformation of the continent ; thus, the university – Europe revealed – is being set at the centre of the process of change in terms of order, welfare, meaning and discovery.

The risk, however, is that such ideals seem too lofty for all kinds of authorities in Europe – be they public, academic or economic - especially when the change horizon four years away. Then, looking further ahead, what are the levers for change to continue after 2010 ? No easy question when 'Bologna' has become a household word in universities all over Europe, not only at the level of leadership but also in faculties and departments where teachers - with students – are asked to imagine the future of their discipline and the way to proceed. This is no simple task for actors many of whom feel the European will is yet another empty word that hides various power struggles in which teachers and students are reluctant to get involved – especially as they lack the necessary distance to view their own situation in a more general context. Then *Euro-compatibility*, instead of being a goal to reach, becomes a set of rules to apply as mechanically as possible; as a consequence, bureaucracy takes over from management. Openness and unpredictability are difficult, indeed, to keep as long term priorities when the temptation exists to fall back on old recipes – even if repackaged for the sake of lip service to the setting up of a European academic space. In the classroom and the laboratory, European identities could remain obscure should the allegiance to ideas and powers beyond the usual national framework not be reinforced – another way of looking at the Bologna process as a focus for European integration. At the same time, effective resistance seems difficult considering that so much has been discussed with all partners that the process seems now to roll forward of its own - simply because all countries, vis-à-vis their neighbours, try 'to keep up with the Jones'', thus introducing comparable measures in reforms of higher education now made to converge.

Remains the question : converge towards what ? The re-engineering of society to accommodate the variety of European people, histories and cultures still needs a more mobilising goal than an ill-defined European Higher Education Area ; there is a need for a focus of development that can fire the imagination of European citizens in search of transformed structures of organisation that fit their hopes and ambitions. In other words, a bit of dissent would help to imagine the 'why' of tomorrow's Europe and a slice of

consent would help define the 'how' on the way to the future. Beyond fears of change, the university can be the place for a reflection empowering people and institutions to rebuild trust in the unexpected; that is the responsibility of higher education and research – especially when free and autonomous universities are the arteries and blood of a common Europe : a matter they should no longer forget or ignore.

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