

1. Introduction

My focus here will be on the university. I do not so much have the Danish Copenhagen Business School (CBS) or MIT in Boston in mind as other big universities, both in Denmark and abroad. It is perhaps precisely because the universities called business schools have business as their main focus that they have been able to integrate humanistic disciplines without severe criticism from outside. In Denmark, for example, the threat against the humanities is much stronger in universities such as Copenhagen University, Aarhus University and the University of Southern Denmark than at CBS. Abroad we witness attacks on philosophy similar to the one we witnessed at the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University in 2010, only the attacks are worse. In Hungary, for example, in the fall of 2010, the new director of the philosophical institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, nominated by the new conservative government that also tried to enslave the press, has dismissed four philosophers and disqualified 15 out of 23 colleagues as “professionally unsuitable” (in German translation: *fachlich ungeeignet*). In addition, a police investigation has been initiated against the famous philosopher Agnes Heller and the vice-president of the Philosophical Society, Mihaly Vajda, for having received financial support from the former government. In England, a Centre for European Philosophy at the University of Middlesex in London was closed in the spring of 2010, and later on transferred to Kingston University. Moreover, in the spring of 2011, the Philosophy department at the university of Keele was threatened to be closed, but was prolonged for the next year after strong international protests.

For sure, this is only the top of the iceberg. Programs in the humanities disappear or are reduced in many universities today, and there is a worldwide serious threat to the humanities in the universities and scientific academies. In addition, many universities are increasingly turning into management institutions. In light of these tendencies, a fundamental question arises: What is a good university? Since a university is an institution, let us first consider the even more fundamental question: What is a good institution?

2. The ideas of an institution

Paul Ricœur defines the idea of an institution in his book *Oneself as Another* as “the good life with and for others, in just institutions.”¹ What does he mean by “just institutions”? For Ricœur just institutions are neither about face-to-face relationships, nor about being submitted to domination. Rather, they allude to communities where everybody in principle is on an equal footing with everyone else. Justice consists in the fact that we recognize each other’s equal rights. Here Ricœur refers to the distinction elaborated by Hannah Arendt

between power-in-common and domination. The latter goes back to Max Weber's idea in *Economy and Society* that the relation of domination, *Herrschaft*, distinguishes the political institution of the State from all other institutions. Characteristic for this relation is that it separates the governing from the governed, and is based on a monopoly of violence. However, according to Arendt, the power-in-common is different. As she says in her most famous work, *The Human Condition*, power-in-common stems directly from the category of action and is "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things and matter" and so "correspond[s] to the human condition of plurality".²

To Ricœur this concept of plurality is important if we want to understand the just institution, because it "suggests the extension of interhuman relations to all those who are left outside of the face-to-face encounter of an "I" and a "you" and remain third parties"³. This third party is always "the inclusive middle term within the plurality that constitutes power", and will never be face in the sense of Emanuel Levinas: the other whom I encounter. It is anonymous in the literal sense of the term, having no name. While its power is fragile, "since it exists only as long as people act together and vanishes when they disperse"⁴, this fragility "is not the raw and naked vulnerability of mortals as such but the second order fragility of institutions and of all the human affairs gravitating around them."⁵

However, Ricœur agrees with Arendt that this action in concert is invisible, "because it is so extensively covered over by relations of domination, and that it is brought to light only when it is about to be destroyed, laying the field open for violence".⁶ Moreover, "this is why this constitutive element can be discerned only in its discontinuous irruptions onto the public stage when history is its most tumultuous."⁷ Here Ricœur might think of what happened when the Youth revolt broke out in '68. Nevertheless, he seems convinced that however weak it may be "it is power, as wanting to live and acting together, that brings to the ethical aim the point of application of its indispensable third dimension: *justice*".

The idea of justice is here both a vision of the good life and a demand for a social order, a distributive operation that is not only economic, but also concerns the apportionment of roles, task and advantages and disadvantages. What is just is "between the good and the legal"⁸. In other words, "a consideration of the institution is part of the ethical aim in its full scope".⁹

Another keyword here is equality. As Ricœur declares, "equality, however it is modulated, is to life in institutions what solicitude is in interpersonal relations".¹⁰ He concludes: "Because of this, the sense of justice takes nothing away from solicitude; the sense of justice presupposes it, to the extent that it holds persons to be irreplaceable.

Justice in turn adds to solicitude, to the extent that the field of application of equality is all of humanity”.¹¹

I believe Arendt and Ricœur are right in claiming that we must distinguish between domination built on *violence*, on the one hand, and power of common action built on a *ordered plurality*, on the other. A system of domination is not simply identical to a just institution, the latter of which is action-in-concert according to common rules. It follows that although in practice there is no pure action-in-common without its inclusion in a system of domination, a criticism of an institution for being purely repressive and unjust must rely on the impossibility of the members of the institution to find a minimum (or too little) of themselves acting therein. It must rely on the impossibility of recognizing in them their own participation in a common action. Thus, in this regard we can say that an institution in which we cannot find ourselves or too little of ourselves is an unjust institution.

3. The University crises in '68 and now

As examples of institutions, Ricœur mentions “people, nation, region and so forth”,¹² (p. 194), but according to Arendt, they comprise much more. Institutions are what she calls “political bodies”, and must include every action in concert inside a people, a nation and the like.¹³ Consequently, every educational body in a society is an institution. From this perspective, when Ricœur writes about the university in the sixties, he writes about an institution, and the critique he directs at the French university system is precisely that it can no longer fulfil the condition of an institution where its members can see themselves as acting in common.

In the preface to a book on *Concepts of the University*, Ricœur describes the sociological background of the youth revolt in '68 at the universities.¹⁴ He mentions the fact that universities at the time had developed into enormous institutions that had to educate a mass of students, which was very expensive for the society at large. On the one hand, the state could not spend money on students without demanding useful results in return. On the other, students could not accept to spend their time in these institutions without demanding personal development. In other words, the political power wanted to gain some goods for society by their investment in the universities, whereas the students wanted to act in common with teachers and each other in order to obtain both knowledge and culture for their personal and social life. Ricœur sees in this conflict a contradiction between two demands placed on a modern university. It should be a liberal university, i.e., an institution of research allowing criticism and testing of new ideas, something that would be impossible if governing authorities would prescribe

the goals of the research. And, it should prepare the students for the qualifications that the society needs for its production and administration.

This contradiction, which in the sixties brought the universities into a deep crisis, is not very different from the contradiction that we experience today, in the society in general and the universities in particular. It is a contradiction between the demand of the universities to explore the material and social reality and 'tell the truth', on the one side, and the demand that they through research and education help to qualify researchers and students for the competition on the world market, on the other. Indeed, in light of the similarities of the two situations, we might learn something by considering what Ricœur has to say about the aforementioned contradiction. He proposes three measures for overcoming the crisis:

First, Ricœur proposes a reform of the universities that avoids both the constraints of pure utility and the destructive rejection of organizations. This renewed liberal university shall both permit free research and integrate researchers in the society, so that they can participate in a responsible way in the scientific, cultural, technological and spiritual adventure of our time.

Second, he imagines a reform that can give the students access to participation in the governance of the universities. Professors, assistants and students should be able to share their activities in discussions about the orientation, development and sanction of studies. Ricœur knew that such an educational relationship would be difficult because of its asymmetrical character, viz. because its aim is to apply the competence and experience of the teacher in the learning process. However, he believed that "the student brings something: talents and tastes, acquired knowledge and parallel knowledge, and particularly a wish of personal accomplishment that only partly can be satisfied by instruction, job training and the acquisition of a culture for leisure."¹⁵ Thus, by his or her partial contribution to the student's project of accomplishment, the teacher still learns. According to Ricœur, he is "really taught by his students and receives from them the opportunity and the permission to realize his own desire for cognition and knowledge. This is the reason why one must even say - to paraphrase Aristotle - that education is the shared act of the master and the student."¹⁶ Moreover, convinced of the idea that the university is the only institution in the modern society in which the most critical thinking can be expressed, Ricœur even imagines that this shared action, if it becomes successful in the universities, might be a model for the society as a whole. It may assist in demolishing its authoritarian institutions.

Third, he pictures a reform accommodating what he calls "zones of transparency

between the university institution and the extra-university world”, which are self-governing, creating a connection between the university culture and the non-university culture. Indeed, universities face a non-university culture in the form of everything from advertising, songs in different media and movies, to pure propaganda. This culture is what most people live by in the leisure-time permitted by modern industrial work. Therefore, it is the task of researchers not only to be critical in their own domain of research, but also of the cultural activities outside the world of research. By the same token, criticism should not be one-way communication, according to Ricœur. Rather, universities should also be listening to criticism from non-university, such as from artists and businesspeople, etc.

Ricœur saw in many ways the youth revolt in the universities as a legitimate revolt against an unjust institution in which the students cannot find themselves. Thus, he sees it as a “cultural revolution” against a system of domination, i.e. a system without space for action-in-common. First, it is a revolt against capitalism, not only because it fails in creating social justice, but because it has succeeded all too well in seducing people by its inhuman project of quantitative well-being. Secondly, it is a revolt against the bureaucracy, not only because it is heavy and ineffective, but because it transforms people into slaves to powers, structures and hierarchical relationships. Finally, Ricœur sees it as a revolt against the “nihilism of a society that, like a cancerous tissue has no other goal than growth; a revolt facing a society of non-sense”.¹⁷ Simultaneously, however, it is a revolt that “intended to promote creation of goods, ideas and values rather than their consummation”.¹⁸

This is the background to Ricœur’s famous declaration that “it is necessary to remain revolutionary when making reform”.¹⁹ And in the seventies, many universities were in fact reformed more or less according to the ideas that Ricœur had formulated so clearly. However, perhaps because there was in the youth of that time too little understanding of the necessity of universities as stable institutions extreme individualism and anarchism often brought the reforms to fail.²⁰

Today we are back in a situation where universities suffer from a contradiction between search for academic freedom for researchers, teachers and students, on the one hand, and political domination through the demand for market utility, on the other. Moreover, today it is not so much the mass of students that destabilize the universities as the mass of bureaucrats, the latter of which transfer the university system into a colossus with feet of clay. Therefore, when students and teachers in our days cannot find themselves in their universities it is because they are often confronted with mega-schools in the form of

top-governed management institutions. While they could find themselves in a liberal university, where students and professors in learning and research could experience participation in common action, they cannot find themselves in the management system of domination and repression into which our universities are now increasingly transformed.

4. The Humboldt model

We should recall that the idea of the university, which exists under so bad conditions today, is more than two hundred years old. In 1798, Immanuel Kant described in his book *The Conflict of the Faculties*, the relationship between the four faculties belonging to university in his time, including that of theology, law, medicine and philosophy. He describes the first three of these as “the higher faculties”. They are considered very useful for the government, but not free. The only entirely free faculty is “the lower faculty” of philosophy (later called the faculty of humanities). Kant believes that although there will always be a conflict between the faculties that are considered useful for the government and the faculty of philosophy which aims at truth, the higher faculties and the lower faculty may in the end move closer to each other. He concludes by saying that “it could well happen that the last would someday become the first (the lower faculty would be the higher) - not indeed in authority, but in counselling the authority (the government). For the government may find the freedom of the philosophy faculty, and the increased insight gained from its freedom, a better means for achieving its ends than its own absolute authority.”²¹

Interestingly, this was exactly what happened a few years later. In 1810, the linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt as minister of education in Prussia created a new university in Berlin and reformed the whole educational system. In the new university, the faculty of philosophy became the higher faculty and a philosopher, J.G. Fichte, became its first rector in 1811, later on to be replaced by another philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel. Its goal was the general cultivation, *allgemeine Bildung*, of the individual. Objective knowledge was from now on to be combined with subjective formation (*Bildung*) of each individual and, as Humboldt said, with “the moral culture of the nation” (*die moralische Kultur der Nation*).²² The Humboldt model expressed the idea of the humanities, and in particular of philosophy, as the leading sciences. It is this idea that today is seriously challenged by the notion of the management university.

The question is what we can do to oppose this pseudo-university. First, we can analyse its condition, which apparently justifies the end of the Humboldt era. Thereafter, we can show how the inner contradiction of the management university sooner or later must

raise a demand for another university, which, according to the dream of Kant, is both allowed to telling the truth and being highly useful for society.

5. Analyses of the condition

The condition for the establishment of the management university was already exposed by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979. In his book *The postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (translated into English in 1984), he described the developed societies of his time in terms of 'the postmodern condition'. This postmodernism does not imply a new cultivation integrating the sciences in a new way while still preserving the humanities as an essential part of the whole, but rather opposes the very focus on cultivation in order to replace it by what Lyotard calls 'performativity'. Lyotard's diagnosis was that more and more research and education would be justified by their performativity.²³ The term 'performativity' was new both in French and in English when the book was published, but it relates to 'performance' and means efficiency in the performance.

Lyotard's analysis is, I would claim, more true today than when he presented it. In the beginning of the 21st century we witness how the educational systems, first in the United States and later in many other countries, are increasingly turned into one single end, that of performativity. Nowadays it is common to speak about *efficiency*, a goal which is possible to measure by tests, including national and public tests in schools, and stimulate by means of competition between classes and schools.

6. The inner contradiction of the Competition State

Now, if you ask the question 'why performativity?', the answer is 'because of the necessary competition on the world market'. The Danish political scientist Ove Kaj Pedersen is right in claiming that today the idea of the welfare state is increasingly replaced by the idea of 'the state of competition'. In his view, the welfare state, in which everybody should be respected as an irreplaceable individual, could not be realized because it was too expensive. Further, it was not able to prevent the weakest from being dominated by the strongest and, consequently, could not assure that everybody was protected by the same rights within a democratic system. Instead, it has become necessary to accept that everybody is an egoist, because this egoism is useful in the competition that has become the condition of all social life.²⁴

What follows from this is that the task of the educational systems in schools and universities is redefined. It is less an education to democracy and social justice and more an education to national and international competition. Moreover, schools and

universities are now obliged to enter into competition with each other and with other agents on the market to which they “sell knowledge”. In this competition, human sciences, and in particular philosophy, have apparently no *raison d’être*. Human sciences and critical philosophy more than any other discipline is considered useless and even dangerous for competition. For this reason, the state of competition suffers from an inner contradiction that is no less serious than the inner contradiction of the welfare state, namely, that it undermines by itself the social cohesion that is supposed to make it acceptable to everybody. In this state, people do not believe in the democratic education of citizens and do not feel responsible for the common good. Everybody can follow his or her interest within the frames defined by those in charge. In addition, belonging to this ideology is the presumption that great leaders are able to disregard their personal interests and establish the social coherence by their control of every common activity. It follows that only they have the task of thinking and acting for the common good. But the question is: how can such altruistic leaders be found amongst the people who have only learnt to think of their own interests and not about the common good? It seems unimaginable.

This is the contradiction: the state of competition, which is supposed to work without people being educated to take care of the common good and mutually recognize the rights of each other, nevertheless needs such an education in order to find good leaders amongst them and justify the destitution of bad leaders. Moreover, it must establish democratic elections and control of the leaders. In other words, the state of competition simultaneously rejects democracy and needs it. The criticism we can and must insist upon is therefore that no society that needs a social and moral coherence can do without education in democracy, and that society therefore must submit the competition to a democratic co-determination.

7. Democracy and cosmopolitanism

This insight is stressed by Martha C. Nussbaum in her recent book *Not for profit: Why democracy needs humanities*. She calls for a fight against the growing contempt for the humanities in universities and school systems. Nussbaum argues that this contempt results in the youth acquiring less and less knowledge about the ideas that are necessary in order to develop into democrats, i.e. autonomous and critical but also realistic citizens who recognize the values of a life together with others – not only national fellow citizens, but also foreigners from other parts of the world. This is exactly what they do not learn, Nussbaum argues, if they only learn how to get material profit and how to be most efficient on the world market. Instead, they have to learn that “a strong economy is a means to human ends, not an end in itself”, since “most of us would not choose to live in a

prosperous nation, that had ceased to be democratic.”²⁵ They have to learn to be responsible persons and to respect others as having equal rights independently of colour, religion, sex, and so on, and to assess what is good and bad for one’s own country as a whole as well as the kind of role it may play jointly with other countries and people in an increasingly complex globalized world.

Nussbaum advocates an education for cosmopolitan citizenship and points in a chapter entitled “Citizens of the World” to the fact that “we live in a world in which people face one another across gulfs of geography, language and nationality. More than at anytime in the past, she says, we all depend on people we have never seen, and they depend on us. The problems we need to solve - economic, environmental, religious and political - are global in their scope.”²⁶ But if we shall handle them, we must involve “the contributions of history, geography, the interdisciplinary studies of culture, the history of law and political systems, and the study of religion - all interacting with one another.”²⁷

According to Lyotard, grand narratives no longer work in the justification or understanding of society. However, this is no longer true. It might be true when it comes to grand stories that were used to legitimize authoritarian regimes such as the narratives of Nazism and Stalinism. However, Nussbaum is right when claiming that today “we need world history and global understanding for reasons that go beyond what is required to understand our own nation.”²⁸ In other words, we need a cosmopolitan story of our world as basis of our universities.

[1](#) *Oneself as Another*, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 172, The English translator has put brackets round ‘good life’, because Ricœur puts brackets round “la vie bonne” in the French text in order to indicate that it does not mean “la bonne vie” which is ‘the pleasant life’, but that is an ethical and more precisely an Aristotelian philosophical concept. In English it is common to use the term as a philosophical expression so it does not need to be put in brackets.

[2](#) Hannah Arendt: *The human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958, p. 7.

[3](#) *Oneself as Another*, p. 195.

[4](#) Ibid., p. 196

[5](#) Ibid.

[6](#) Ibid., p. 197.

[7](#) Ibid.

[8](#) Paul Ricoeur: « Le juste entre le légal et le bon » in *Lectures 1*, 1991, Seuil, Paris, pp. 176 - 195 (not translated into English).

[9](#) *Oneself as Another*, p. 201.

[10](#) Ibid., p. 202.

[11](#) Ibid.

[12](#) Ibid., p. 9.

[13](#) *The Human Condition*, p. 9.

[14](#) Paul Ricoeur : "Trois ripostes à la crise universitaire", in *Conceptions de l'Université*, eds. Jacques Drèze et Jean Debelle, Editions Universitaires, Paris, 1969; published in *Le Monde* 17.1.1969

[15](#) *Lectures 1*, p. 382.

[16](#) Ibid.

[17](#) Ibid.

[18](#) Paul Ricoeur: "Réforme et révolution dans l'Université", *Lectures 1*, p.380.

[19](#) Paul Ricoeur: "Réforme et révolution dans l'Université", *Lectures 1*, p. 381.

[20](#) Ricoeur himself was very disappointed by this development in France, and he never again wrote about a reform of universities, see P. Kemp: "Ricoeur and education: Ricoeur's implied philosophy of education" in *Ricoeur across the disciplines*, ed. by Scott Davidson. Continuum, New York, 2010, p. 181-194.

[21](#) Immanuel Kant: *The conflict of the Faculties/ Der Streit der Fakultäten* [bilingual edition], translated by Mary J. Gregor, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1979, p. 59.

[22](#) Wilhelm von Humboldt: "Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin" in *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1964, p. 255.

[23](#) Jean-François Lyotard: *La condition postmoderne, Rapport sur le savoir*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1979, Chapters 11 and 12 (English translation: *The Postmodern Condition, Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, chapter 11 and 12).

[24](#) Ove K. Pedersen : *Konkurrence Staten*, Hans Reitzels forlag, Copenhagen, 2011.

[25](#) Martha C. Nussbaum: *Not for profit. Why democracy needs humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, p. 10-11.

[26](#) Ibid., p. 79-80.

[27](#) Ibid., p. 86-87.

[28](#) Ibid. . p. 81-82.

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