STUDENT EDUCATION, STUDENT LIFE*

THE STUDENT: CONCEPT AND TYPOLOGY

At European universities and in European societies the concepts ‘university’, ‘faculty’, ‘doctor’, ‘master’, ‘student’, and the like have been in use for virtually 800 years. Despite this long usage, however, the realities behind the words have only ostensibly remained the same. In general, modern notions are of little help when it comes to understanding medieval phenomena, and this is particularly true of the social phenomena of universities organized around groups of individuals. Particularly in a chapter devoted to the ‘medieval Student’, one must be aware from the outset that concepts can be no more than linguistic shells housing a great variety of different meanings, each dependent on its age. One should therefore approach the matter gingerly, seeking to find neutral terms like ‘scholars’, ‘enrolled members’, or ‘matriculants’ whenever for reasons of historical fact or linguistic form – it is called for. For the sake of clarity, the term ‘university attender’ will be used in this chapter.

When one surveys the European scene, it is striking that there is not a single university in any country for which one can paint a generalized picture of the medieval Student – and this irrespective of century. The mere issues of admission and matriculation serve to show how diffuse the concept is: there was no more or less uniform secondary education, school and university shading into one another, and no hard-and-fast distinction was made between the concepts ‘pupil’ and ‘student’. Both were members of the university and of the school. Students were also members of a great variety of different age groups – from children under the age of fourteen to adults in their twenties or thirties. Such institutions as the ‘oath appropriate to rank’ and the ‘rank fees’ rendered at matriculation ensured that the Status of students was not equal even on a legal plane, let alone socially.1

That, however, is not the end of the story. In contrast to today, there were substantial discrepancies in status between those studying in differing faculties or ‘specialist’ universities, notably in the universities of arts or of law – discrepancies which could occasionally break out into full-fledged discord. This was the case with the so-called secession in Prague in 1371 when, under the one roof of the Studium Pragense, two universities with two rectors were established: on the one hand the universitas of the men of arts, theology, and medicine and on the other hand that of the men of law. The threat of such a development existed until the end of the Middle Ages and was even especially acute again in the opening phase of the University of Basle, when the students of law refused to make common cause with others attending the university. In the final analysis, the reason was always the mutual incompatibility of two social environments in one and the same universitas. Only with the emergence of the modern princely state and municipal government as bearers of the universities of the post-universal age could these dualistic tendencies be prevented. To keep up the old reserves and preserves it was sufficient to employ symbolic actions and exhibit a different life style.

Modern notions are equally unhelpful when one enquires into the objectives the students had in studying. From the perspective of today, the great proportion of medieval university attenders would have to be classified as drop-outs or even failures. As late as 1500, it was by no means normal to sit any form of examination. The vast majority were satisfied to attend and belong. The social possibilities opened up by the university did not yet require control by a special system of entitlement based on examinations and graduation.

Among those attending the medieval universities of Europe, at least five types of student can be detected. These types simultaneously make up a pyramid-shaped diagram of university attendance, the pyramid having a quantitatively broad base and relatively narrow apex.

The first type is to be found in the faculties of arts. The student is, in the vast majority of cases, a young man of between fourteen and sixteen years of age, who is, as a rule, matriculating at a university for the first time and who meets the prescribed legal and financial conditions of admission as well as he can. His social background is likely to be ‘middle-class’, with a broad range from rich to poor, corresponding to the spread among overall university attenders. In all probability, he has previously attended the Latin school in his home region and has acquired at least a basic knowledge of reading and writing as well as