INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND POLITICAL VOCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY. WHICH MODEL OF THE ‘REPUBLIC OF SCHOLARS’? (KANT, HUMBOLDT, FICHTE)

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Introduction

In this contribution, I would like to try to bring some elements of an answer to the question regarding in which sense the internal organization of the University, as well as its relations with social authorities, constitute an important issue for the political philosophy of German Idealism, or in other words, how far has a real political significance and function to be attributed to the concept of “Republic of scholars” (Republik des Gelehrten)?

A basis for our research can be found in the way Kant poses the terms of the philosophico-political problem of the University in the Conflict of the faculties. One of the key issues of this writing of 1798 is firstly to guarantee the independence of the lower faculty of philosophy vis-à-vis the authority of State and Church, but also, within the University, vis-à-vis the higher faculties of Theology, Law and Medicine, which are distinct from the first as they immediately respond to the needs of those social authorities.¹ But besides this negative freedom, the faculty of philosophy has to control the scientific value of the statutes of the higher faculties and to enter into a long conflict with them in order to inverse the subordination of truth to social utility as defined by the authorities, to gain in influence over the people and to contribute to the public use of reason.² The Kantian concept of “Republic of scholars” is thus structured by a sequence of three moments: demand for academic freedom, exercise of institutional autonomy in the scientific organization of the University and growth of the influence of scholars over the public.

² I. Kant, Der Streit der Facultäten, AK VII, 30, 33, 32–36.
The philosophical successors of Kant attempted to develop this concept of “Republic of scholars”, by concentrating further on the close link between politics and education. More precisely, it is an essential philosophical tension that arises for them between, on the one hand, the claim of institutional autonomy of the University and, on the other hand, the political vocation of the scholars and the temptation of the philosophers to take on the moral-political authority for educating citizens. The contrastive positions of Humboldt, more liberal, and of Fichte, more dirigiste, represent well the two poles of this tension.

The objective of the present paper is to start from the confrontation between both models of organization of the University in order to question the relevance of the authoritarian reading of the Fichtean orientation by referring it to the speculative and epistemological issues of his applied philosophy.

1. **The organization of the new University of Berlin: two models in conflict**

From the first decade of the 19th century, the post-Kantian generation of German Idealism finds the historical opportunity to put its reflection on the political dimension of the “Republic of scholars” into practice and to confront empirically to the tension inherent in the educative mediation of political philosophy. With the foundation of the new University of Berlin, from 1807 to 1810, some central philosophical personalities, like Fichte, Humboldt or Schleiermacher, are key figures on the most practical and concrete organizational questions.

The context in which their interventions are situated is characterised by three kinds of issue. In the aftermath of the military routs of 1806, Prussia had lost the duchy of Magdeburg and with it the University of Halle; from the historico-political point of view, the idea of minister Beyme to found a University in Berlin corresponded with a necessity for regenerating the German people through education, as well as being a cultural riposte to the Napoleonian invader. Secondly, the debates around the organization of this new establishment of higher education implied a philosophico-systematic issue: for the idealists,

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