CHAPTER 11

The Very Idea of Higher Education

Vocation of Man or Vocational Training?

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In general, indeed, the wise in all ages have always said the same thing, and the fools, who at all times form the immense majority, have in their way too acted alike, and done just the opposite; and so it will continue. For, as Voltaire says, we shall leave this world as foolish and as wicked as we found it on our arrival.¹

Introduction

A common objection today to references to Humboldt is that they are merely nostalgic: the mass university has de facto been integrated into a political economic system from which it cannot be separated without serious damage, if not outright destruction, to both.² Yet a critique of the present need not be a call for a return to some mythical, glorious past. The following reflections are not concerned with Humboldt’s writings as such, nor to the uses or abuses of Humboldt’s name in struggle for the identity of the university; but I do try to recall the spirit, if not the letter, of Humboldt’s thought, and most especially of the ethos that guided it. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Humboldt saw a way to reform the university, not only administratively, but in its very conception. His reforms were to make the university something of use to mankind by entrusting its functions to the scientific spirit of its faculty and the diligence of the students. Vocational schools, it was thought, arrested students’

This is an important point, because the pressure toward the ‘vocationalization’ of the university is seemingly ever-present and nearly irresistible, and has been so for more than a hundred years, as attested by Nietzsche:

But the present age is, as aforesaid, supposed to be an age, not of whole mature and harmonious personalities, but of labour of the greatest possible common utility. That means, however, that men have to be adjusted to the purposes of the age so as to be ready for employment as soon as possible: they must labour in the factories of the general good before they are mature—indeed so that they shall not become mature—for this would be a luxury which would deprive the ‘labour market’ of a great deal of the workforce...the words ‘factory’, ‘labour market’, ‘supply’, ‘making profitable’ and whatever auxiliary verbs egoism now employs, come unbidden to the lips when one wishes to describe the most recent generation of men of learning. Sterling mediocrity grows even more mediocre, science ever more profitable in the economic sense.3

Nietzsche describes an ethos that we recognize as belonging very much to our day. In the last section, I will attempt to show how this ethos is institutionalized as official policy in the Bologna Process.

An Education Suited to an Idea of Man

I don’t know what I want, but I know how to get it.4

One of the difficulties attending any attempt to delimit and define the aims of higher education is that any concrete notion about its purpose and function is intimately tied to what a given community at a certain point in time takes for granted about many other important questions. And such aims are of necessity also formulated in the idiom of that community, expressing its ways of thinking and speaking, including what it values and what it despises. Ideas about higher education are necessarily related to hopes and fears about the world that the coming generation is going to inherit, ideas about what they will need to know when they take the steering wheel. In short, the question has to

4 Sex Pistols, ‘Anarchy in the UK’ (EMI, 1976).