

Ambivalence: Contradictions in Contemporary Higher Education¹

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In this presentation, I propose to argue (a) that universities are profoundly ambivalent institutions; (b) that this ambivalence explains a great deal about their behavior that would otherwise remain inexplicable; (c) that one of the most striking manifestations of this ambivalence can be found in universities' attitudes towards change; and (d) that this ambivalence has its roots in a fundamental tension in modern society about the university's purposes.

There is good reason to believe that this set of observations holds true for universities everywhere, although to different degrees and in different ways. As a case in point, this article focuses on the process of change (and non-change) in German higher education over the past ten years.

1. Ambivalence

When I argue that universities are profoundly ambivalent institutions, I do not suggest, of course, that there is no ambivalence elsewhere; what it does mean, however, is that the realm of higher education reveals, comparatively speaking,

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an unusually and quite exceptionally pervasive, persistent and unmistakable quality of ambivalence. This ambivalence, furthermore, is not just something that is intrinsic to the culture of academia, but is in turn a function of societal and political contradictions about the role of knowledge and about the purposes of the university. Ambivalence begets ambivalence, as it were.

I use the term “ambivalence” here in two different, but related and complementary meanings: contradiction and uncertainty. In the first sense, ambivalence is defined, by no less an authority than Merriam-Webster, as “contradictory attitudes ... toward a particular person or object and often with one attitude inhibiting the expression of another”. The second meaning speaks of ambivalence as “uncertainty as to which approach, attitude or treatment to follow”. There is ample evidence for both meanings in higher education; in this presentation, however, I will focus on the first, contradiction.

However, and once again, nobody says it better and more concisely than venerable old Montaigne: “*Mais nous sommes, je ne sais comment, doubles en nous-mêmes, qui fait que ce que nous croyons, nous ne le croyons pas, et ne nous pouvons défaire de ce que nous condamnons.*”³

The notion of ambivalence has a rich and varied tradition not only in psychology and psychoanalysis (from Eugen Bleuler in 1910⁴ to Sigmund Freud and the work of Joost Meerloo⁵ all the way to contemporary scholarship in feminist psychology about “Mothering and Ambivalence”⁶), but in literary scholarship⁷ and in the social sciences as well.

³ Montaigne 1998, p. 461 (“But we are, I know not how, of two minds in ourselves, which is why what we believe we do not believe, and cannot disengage ourselves from what we condemn.”)

⁴ Cited by Merton 1976, p.3.

⁵ Meerloo 1954.

⁶ Such as Hollway and Featherstone 1997.

⁷ See, for example, the work of Susan Cole (1985) on rituals of mourning in the literature of different cultures, Shanta Dutta on Hardy (2000), or Dagmar Ottmann on Tieck (1990).

As some examples of the many fascinating literary analyses of ambivalence (some of which use psychological or psychoanalytical constructs), I should perhaps mention the work of Susan Cole (1985) on rituals of mourning in the literature of different cultures, Shanta Dutta on Hardy (2000), or Dagmar Ottmann on Tieck (1990).

In what I find, against the background of my own work on the international politics of knowledge (Weiler 2001b), a particularly interesting argument, Homi Bhaba writes about the “ambivalence of cultural authority” (1994, 34) in the postcolonial world and, specifically, about “the ambivalence of colonial discourse” in which “two attitudes towards external reality persist; one takes reality into consideration while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, re-articulates ‘reality’ as mimicry.” (ibid., 91)

In the social sciences, Marx, Durkheim and, indeed, Montaigne, have pioneered the concept of ambivalence, if not the term, but one of the particularly influential contributions to the study of ambivalence remains that of Robert Merton, whose work on the ambivalence of professions⁸ is particularly germane to what this presentation is all about, and will be discussed further below. It has been followed, more or less congenially, by a host of other scholars, including Gary Thom⁹ and Andrew Weigert¹⁰, but still remains a major milestone¹¹.

In this context, the work of Zygmunt Bauman on “modernity and ambivalence” raises a particularly interesting point in the way it casts the struggle of “exterminating ambivalence” as a “typically modern practice, the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life”¹², only to conclude that, in the

⁸ Merton 1976, Part 1, pp. 3-105.

⁹ Thom 1984.

¹⁰ Weigert 1991.

¹¹ See also, for a particularly illuminating study of ambivalence in the context of the German political culture, Ralf Dahrendorf’s classic on “Society and Democracy in Germany” (1965).

¹² Bauman 1991, p. 7.

wake of modernity, we have learned to “be living at peace with ambivalence”¹³. “Once declared to be a mortal danger to all social and political order, ambivalence is not an ‘enemy at the gate’ any more. On the contrary: like everything else, it has been made into one of the stage props in the play called postmodernity”¹⁴.

This line of argument reminds me, incidentally, of the early Dahrendorf, who knew nothing about postmodernity and wouldn’t have cared about it if he did, but who makes the point in his classic on “Society and Democracy in Germany” (1965) that German society stands out – particularly in comparison with Anglo-Saxon societies – in the degree to which it abhors ambivalence and uncertainty, and always longs for definitive and authoritative solutions that do away with ambivalence, preferably once and for all. He substantiates his point with an impressive and quite persuasive analysis of different social institutions – from the family to the courts, and from the trade union movement to politics proper – and defines this uneasy relationship to ambivalence as the true “German question”.

Giorgio Agamben has, in his discussion of the sacred, some serious difficulties with the notion of ambivalence for which, as for so much else, he blames both Freud and the birth of anthropology, and which he claims muddies up the pure waters of an unambiguous meaning of the sacred. I cannot quite reconcile this stance with the seemingly rather ambivalent way he deals with the notion of “Forma di Vita”, where I have the impression that, for all his militating against the notion of ambivalence, he might not be entirely beyond making use of the intellectual expedient of ambivalence. That would, of course, in my line of reasoning, prove him to be a true academic. I do, however, wholeheartedly resonate to Agamben’s observation that “there is a moment in the life of concepts when they lose their immediate intelligibility and can then, like all empty terms, be overburdened with contradictory meanings” (1998, 80). That, too, is part of the

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 279; see also Smart 1999.

story of ambivalence, and the history of the social sciences is an endless reservoir of examples.

2. Ambivalence and higher education

My argument about the ambivalent quality of universities can claim a prima facie plausibility for everybody familiar with higher education; it also has a fairly decent record in the literature¹⁵. Indeed, universities could almost be defined by their own ambivalences, i.e., by their own “contradictory attitudes” towards a wide variety of objects: towards knowledge, society, change, authority, democracy, and – most consequential of all – towards themselves. From whatever angle one examines universities, there seems to be pervasive evidence of ambivalence – with the one notable exception of a rather unambivalent resistance to outside judgments about the university’s ambivalence.

As one looks at universities in different settings, there is ambivalence

- about the relative priority of teaching and research,
- about the proper relationship between the university and the state, or between the university and business,
- about what and whom to include and to exclude from the pursuits of the university,
- about how centralized or decentralized the structures of decision-making should be,
- about how democratic or how authoritarian a university’s governance should be,
- about the relative importance of the autonomy of the individual scholar and the autonomy of the institution,
- about how national or international an institution the university should be,

¹⁵ See, among many others, Cohen and March 1986. In another realm of educational policy analysis, I have made use of the notion of ambivalence in connection with the issue of centralization and decentralization (Weiler 1993).

- about how regulated or deregulated the life of the university and its members should be,
- about the importance or obsolescence of disciplines,
- about the relative virtues of the status quo and of change, or of freedom and order –

to mention just a few.

It might be instructive to imagine for a moment a similar degree of ambivalence in any other social institution. Imagine, for example, courts of law that were similarly ambivalent about what does and does not constitute admissible evidence.

Imagine even remotely similar degrees of ambivalence in traffic, in public transportation, in an orchestra, or in space travel – and it becomes clear how exceptionally ambivalent an institution the university is, and how important it is to appreciate this ambivalence if one really wants to understand how and why universities behave as they do.

I am about to take a closer look at some of these instances of ambivalence, and to use these examples as stepping stones to the further question of why this might be so. Examples will be drawn primarily from the German system of higher education, partly because this author has looked at German universities particularly closely for some time now, from both the inside and the outside¹⁶, and partly because – from looking at a number of other university systems – there is reason to believe that German higher education is both a reasonably representative and a particularly instructive variant of the general pattern.

It should be emphasized that this piece does not address the question of whether or not, and on what grounds, ambivalence may be good or bad, functional or dysfunctional for institutions of higher education. In making this disclaimer, I am also resisting the temptation to suggest that ambivalence about its own goals and purposes could serve as a wonderful defense mechanism for an institution. It is

¹⁶ Weiler 1996, 1998a, 2001a, 2001c.

not difficult to imagine how easily a university could avoid accountability for its results and accomplishments as long as there is ambivalence about exactly what an institution is supposed to accomplish. As long as there is ambivalence about a university's goals and purposes, it makes little sense to hold it accountable for whether or not it has achieved its goals.

I have already pointed out that there is a respectable tradition in the social sciences of dealing with ambivalence as a characteristic of social organizations – a tradition that, in Robert Merton's words, is based on the “premise that the structure of social roles consists of arrangements of norms and counter norms which have evolved to provide the flexibility of normatively acceptable behavior required to deal with changing states of a social relation”¹⁷. Surely not only Merton can think of many situations in higher education that require that kind of flexibility.

In fact, Merton himself is quick to make the connection to academia when he applies this notion of “potentially conflicting pairs of norms” to scientists and scientific institutions, and comes up with a whole series of such conflicting pairs of norms¹⁸. Let me highlight just a few samples:

Norm: The scientist should make every effort to know the work of predecessors and contemporaries in his field.

BUT: Too much reading and erudition will only stultify creative work (citing as one of his examples what Schopenhauer considered a major “sin against the Holy Ghost”, namely, “to put away one's original thoughts in order to take up a book.”)
(33)

or

¹⁷ Merton 1976, p. 31.

¹⁸ Merton 1976, pp. 33-34. Some time ago, this author had occasion to reflect on the experience of six years as head of an institution of higher education in Germany, and came up with a remarkably similar list of contradictions (or ambivalences) in the life of a university (see Weiler 2001c).

Norm: Scientific knowledge is universal, belonging to no nation.

BUT: Each scientific discovery does honor to the nation that fostered it. (34)

or

The scientist should recognize the prime obligation to train up new generations of scientists.

BUT: He must not allow teaching to preempt his energies at the expense of advancing knowledge. (He adds: Of course, this reads just as persuasively in reverse.) (34)

or

Norm: Young scientists can have no happier condition than being apprenticed to a master of the scientific art.

BUT: They must become their own men, questing for autonomy and not content to remain in the shadow of great men (some of the examples cited include Kepler and Tycho Brahe, Jung and Adler vs. Freud, etc.) (34)¹⁹

Quite in keeping with Merton's basic argument, all those who have tried to make sense of the institution of the American university presidency owe a great debt to Michael Cohen and James March for their classic study on "Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President"²⁰. Who with some experience in American (and, indeed, German) higher education would not resonate to the following observation: "The college president has more potential for moving the

¹⁹ Since I don't read Robert Merton all the time, even though I should, I have only come across this particular list recently, *after* I wrote a paper reflecting on the experience of my six years as head of an institution of higher education in Germany. In this paper, I drew up a similar list of contradictions (or ambivalences) in the life of a university, and it is absolutely uncanny how remarkably these two lists resemble one another (see Weiler 2001c).

²⁰ Cohen and March 1986.

college than most people, probably more potential than any one other person. Nevertheless, presidents discover that they have less power than is believed, that their power to accomplish things depends heavily on what they want to accomplish, that the use of formal authority is limited by other formal authority, that the acceptance of authority is not automatic, that the necessary details of organizational life confuse power (which is somewhat different from diffusing it), and *that their colleagues seem to delight in complaining simultaneously about presidential weakness and presidential willfulness.*"²¹

3. Ambivalence and the German university

It would go beyond the scope of this presentation to provide an extensive introduction to the nature and the peculiarities of German higher education²². Suffice it to highlight the following points that are particularly germane to this article's argument:

1. German higher education is much more of a "system" than, for example, American higher education; it operates under system-wide norms and regulations and – some recent differentiation notwithstanding – features a considerable degree of homogeneity across institutions.
2. It is essentially a public system, with the vast majority of funds being provided straight from (state and federal) government budgets, and with fairly encompassing control over the use of those funds by the state bureaucracy. There are a few private institutions, all small and most of them highly specialized in business administration, computer science and other easily marketable subjects; their number is growing, but they remain a marginal phenomenon. Also, except for these private institutions, public higher education is still entirely tuition free, even though a recent decision

²¹ Cohen and March 1986, pp. 197-198 (emphasis supplied).

²² See, for more extensive treatments, Daxner 1999; Enders et al. 2002; Fallon 1980; Mittelstraß 1994; Rothfuß 1997; Teichler et al. 1998; Weiler 1998a, 2001a.

- by the Federal Constitutional Court has opened up the possibility of introducing tuition fees of a relatively modest amount.
3. It's a federal system where the 15 states have largely exclusive jurisdiction over higher education, with some considerable participation by the federal government through such channels as supporting university investments, research funding, and student support.
 4. German reunification, which had seemed to offer a unique opportunity for substantially redesigning key social institutions, such as the university, did in fact, and to the bewilderment of many observers, *not* produce any major change in German higher education. However, just when that historic opportunity appeared to have been missed, a significant movement towards university reform got underway and has, over the past decade, generated a great deal of change²³.

Against this background, this case study focuses on five areas of ambivalence that appear to be particularly pronounced (and instructive) in the German case.

1. Ambivalence about autonomy
2. Ambivalence about change
3. Ambivalence about inclusion and exclusion
4. Ambivalence about universities as national or international institutions
5. Ambivalence about the role of students

3.1 Ambivalence about autonomy

Universities everywhere have traditionally and persistently been adamant about the importance of their being autonomous, typically meaning the rights of the

²³ This somewhat peculiar sequence of non-developments and developments deserves, and has received, a more detailed treatment than is possible here: Weiler 2001c; see also Müller-Böling 2000; Stifterverband 2002.

individual scholar to be free of outside interference in his or her performance of academic duties in teaching and research.

In a remarkable accomplishment of living with contradiction, the university (at least in its prevailing European incarnation) has for an extended part of its history been able to reconcile this firm insistence on autonomy with the persistence of an institutional relationship between the university and the state that was both utterly non-autonomous and characterized by more or less total dependence on both the regulatory and providential tutelage of the state over the university – with the one notable exception, of course, of not directly interfering with the individual professor's "autonomy".

This traditional contradiction is very much at the heart of the kind of ambivalence in the contemporary German university that I am interested in pursuing here. For reasons which have been analyzed elsewhere²⁴, there has been, over the last ten years or so, a significant political move in the direction of a more autonomous relationship between state and university, and in the direction of the conception of a university, by now enshrined in the higher education laws of several German states, that possesses a rather high degree of institutional autonomy and self-determination, in some instances all the way to significant control over budgetary and personnel matters. The Technical University of Darmstadt has become a pilot project in rather far-reaching autonomy, and the new higher education law for the state of Baden-Württemberg that took effect at the beginning of this year carries the universities' authority over the management of their own resources and over the determination of their own futures a considerable step beyond the more modest amounts of autonomy in most of the other states.

One of the main arguments of the advocates for this degree of institutional autonomy²⁵ has been the need for the university to mobilize its own resources

²⁴ Weiler 1999, 2000.

²⁵ Such as Müller-Böling 2000; Daxner 1999.

more effectively behind a set of institutional goals and priorities that respond more adequately to the society's need for knowledge and training; the notion of more sharply defined "institutional profiles" has loomed large in these debates.

This kind of strategy is obviously on a collision course with the staunch advocacy of professorial autonomy in the traditional sense. What, under the old regime, the authority of the state had no right to interfere with – namely the rights and privileges of the individual professor – clearly is now at least as much in jeopardy by "the university's" efforts to marshal synergies and mobilize its own resources by imposing a certain degree of direction and purposiveness on the aggregate of its intellectual resources²⁶.

The ambivalence that results from this development is obvious: "autonomy", long a unanimous and unambiguous battle cry for professorial rights, has suddenly become a two-sided sword and a highly ambivalent political agenda. Institutional autonomy competes with individual autonomy. Two different outcomes – the independence of the university from the state's bureaucratic tutelage and the freedom of a professor's research and teaching – are competing with one another in a political setting in which one is perceived to be inimical to the other: More autonomy from the state is seen (quite correctly) as giving the university's leadership more of a mandate to marshal the institution's resources behind the university's mission and thus to encroach somewhat upon the professors' unlimited right to his or her own academic agenda. At the same time, the unfettered exercise of the individual faculty member's autonomy is seen as undermining the very degrees of freedom that the university has gained in the battle for greater autonomy from the state.

The somewhat paradoxical outcome of all of this is a rather ambivalent attitude on the part of the professoriate towards the notion of greater university autonomy from the state, and even a tendency to rather retain the considerable, but more

²⁶ See Enders 1998, p. 59 and *passim*; cf. Altbach 1996.

distant and not very activist authority of the state as the lesser evil compared to the rather close and possibly quite enterprising authority of a university president or dean to whom the state has delegated considerable decision making authority.

3.2 Ambivalence about change

In a slightly different sense, the situation that has just been described can also be cast as a profound ambivalence in the contemporary German university towards change. There is, on the one hand, a diffuse general belief in the intellectual inevitability and, indeed, desirability of change as a result of the ongoing process of inquiry and expanding knowledge. At a considerable level of abstraction, there appears to be a consensus that new knowledge is likely to generate new reality, that discovery, invention and understanding are bound to alter and improve human lives and the conditions under which human beings interact with one another and with their physical and social environment.

At the same time, however, universities are notable for their resistance to change²⁷, particularly when their own institutional arrangements and conditions of work are concerned. Some of this resistance has to do with fear of the unknown, some with concern over losing acquired rights and privileges in the process of structural change (a situation for which the German language has coined the inimitable and untranslatable term “Besitzstandswahrung”), but there is more to it than that.

This author’s anecdotal, but patently representative, experience during the 1990s at the helm of a newly established German university²⁸ is pertinent here,

²⁷ What Mittelstraß calls their “structural inability to change” [*Reformunfähigkeit*], 1994, p. 17.

²⁸ Viadrina European University at Frankfurt (Oder) - a new, post-unification university about 60 miles east of Berlin, right on the Polish-German border and set up with a special mandate for both interdisciplinary and international scholarship, the latter particularly with a view to cooperation with Poland and the rest of Central Europe. As a new university, established at a time of rather

particularly with regard to efforts to move away from some of the hallow traditions in German higher education²⁹. The experience is a case in point of precisely the kinds of arguments that have already been mentioned: the concern on the part of the faculty over losing the prerogatives that one had just so arduously acquired, or simply apprehension over entering uncharted territory and departing from time-honored ways in which, for example, lawyers had always been trained, etc. One of the mantras which was heard in the university senate time and again was “but this is the way we have always done it in” – and one would fill in Cologne, Heidelberg, or Berlin.

But there was and is a more serious kind of resistance to change that, on the part of some of its advocates, reflects a genuine ambivalence between the value of change and innovation and the value of professional legitimacy. The argument goes roughly like this: It’s a good idea to innovate and to change an institution, but in doing that, we run the risk of moving our university out of the mainstream of respectable academia, and put not only the reputation of our faculty, but also the chances of our students and graduates in jeopardy.

This is both a serious and a very instructive kind of ambivalence. It is, for those familiar with the history of German higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, forever associated with the fate of the University of Bremen which, as the prize it had to pay for rather boldly moving ahead into new directions of academic training (including the training of lawyers), was ostracized and marginalized in the academic world in ways that have even survived some of the innovations that triggered it³⁰.

momentous social and political change in that part of the world, the Viadrina was meant by its founding parents to be a “reform university”.

²⁹ Weiler 1996, 1998b, 2001c.

³⁰ Other newly founded universities like Konstanz and Bochum featured more moderate degrees of innovation, and were thus, and by being more circumspect in their public posture, spared the fate of Bremen.

Without a doubt, this is an awkward choice for a university to make, especially a new and unknown one. Does one seize on the chance of a new beginning, and risk not being taken seriously in the community of established and reputable universities? Does one try to distinguish oneself by being different, or by being particularly faithful to the existing institutional precedents, and what are the institutional and professional costs of either strategy? It is not surprising that, in situations like this, universities tend to “play it safe” and sacrifice change on the altar of academic respectability.

3.3 Ambivalence about inclusion and exclusion

A third kind of ambivalence in higher education has to do with the issue of inclusion and exclusion. This is an issue that tends to be more acutely perceived at American universities, but has begun to haunt the German university as well as it undergoes a process of further and more competition-based differentiation³¹.

There is by now, albeit to a different degree, in both systems of higher education a basic tension between the conflicting goals of openness and selectivity, of giving as many people as possible a chance vs. selecting the ones for whom academic success can most safely be predicted³². At least some of the current preoccupation in Germany with the introduction of consecutive degree programs

³¹ This author had an instructive experience recently with a bi-national seminar of American and German specialists in higher education, which was to deal with the issue of “democratization in higher education” and had given the participants relatively free reign in how to define that issue for purposes of their own contribution to the seminar. It was interesting that almost all of the American participants defined the issue of democratization in terms of access to higher education, while almost all of the German participants defined it in terms of university governance and structure. There clearly is, at least at this point in history, a considerably greater preoccupation in the U.S. than in Germany with questions of equity, which also reflects, of course, the much more differentiated nature of the U.S. system of higher education. This is likely to change, and there will be probably once again much more concern with access in German higher education as soon as Germany will have, as now seems inevitable, both tuition fees and more university control over student admissions.

³² Rothfuß 1997, pp. 155-221.

of the BA/MA kind³³ reflects this tension and attempts to solve it, just as at least some of the American debate about affirmative action³⁴ is rooted in this kind of ambivalence.

There is, however, yet another kind of ambivalence in terms of inclusion or exclusion, and that pertains to the inclusion or exclusion of certain kinds of knowledge from the purview of the university. One of the more conspicuous manifestations of this issue were the curricular warfares over the shape and content of the undergraduate curriculum at many of the United States' universities and colleges in the 1980s³⁵.

That, however, is only the proverbial tip of a much larger iceberg. The real issue was, and continues to be, the much more fundamental question of the legitimacy of different kinds and traditions of knowledge, and of the grounds on which such legitimacy is established and claimed. The future of interdisciplinary programs is as much part of that issue as the debate about the "culturality" of knowledge³⁶, the questions raised by feminist epistemology³⁷, the growing debate about the "governance of science"³⁸, or the notion of a relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power³⁹. In that more fundamental sense, the debate is far from over and is one of the more fundamental sources for the ambivalence of the contemporary university, in Germany as elsewhere.

3.4 Ambivalence about universities as national or international institutions

It is remarkable how ardently scholars will profess the internationality and universality of scholarship, and how intensely at the same time universities as

³³ Wissenschaftsrat 2000.

³⁴ Bowen and Bok 1998.

³⁵ Berman 1992; Carnochan 1993.

³⁶ Böhme and Scherpe 1996, pp. 7-24; Geertz 1983.

³⁷ Harding 1986.

³⁸ Fuller 2000.

³⁹ Weiler 2001b.

institutions are beholden in so many ways to national frames of reference. Here lies another source of ambivalence that makes it difficult for universities to come to terms with what they are, especially at a time when the relevance of national frames of reference is increasingly subject to questions⁴⁰. Here again, German higher education serves as an instructive case in point.

It is, of course, true that knowledge and scholarship transcend national boundaries; but it is equally true that, especially where its teaching and training function is concerned, a university's mission (and in particular a German university's mission) is circumscribed in major ways by nationally defined standards, rules and regulations – from the training of lawyers to the training of teachers and from the entrance requirements for civil service positions to the equilibration between certain educational achievements and public salary scales. When it comes to defining desirable or legitimate outcomes of a German university education, the nation state is alive and well, and has developed the recognition of such outcomes in career and income terms into a veritable art form⁴¹.

The ambivalence regarding national and international frames of reference in higher education is exacerbated, however, by the increasingly transnational quality of the politics of knowledge. This refers not only to the general transnational quality of the production, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge, but more specifically to the growing international traffic of ideas and

⁴⁰ Teichler et al. 1998, pp. 79-96; Wächter 1999.

⁴¹ Pertinent in this connection is the (true) story of the process of hiring two new faculty members at Frankfurt (Oder) – after all, at a university with a special international mandate. One of the two professors came from the University of Munich and one from the University of Warsaw. For an extended transitional period, German civil service regulations permit newly appointed professors to claim the reimbursement of travel expenses to regularly visit their families as long as they still live in their old location (“Familienheimfahrten” is the official bureaucratic term for it.). Thus, the professor from Munich was regularly paid the airfare for going home to Munich over the weekend. For faculty whose families reside abroad, however, the official rules specify that travel can only be reimbursed to the nearest German border station. For our colleague from Warsaw, inasmuch as Frankfurt (Oder) is situated already on the German-Polish border, this meant that his reimbursement was limited to the taxi ride from the university to the railway station in Frankfurt (Oder) – but only, of course, if he could prove that he had unusually heavy books and papers to carry, because otherwise he was only entitled to the cost of public transportation.

prescriptions about what universities are, and ought to be. There have been historical antecedents for this kind of traffic, as in the role that German university concepts have played in the development of higher education in the United States in the 19th century⁴², but nothing compares to the pervasiveness with which models of higher education have started to travel around the world in the last quarter of the 20th century. This latter traffic has been remarkably one-way in that it has essentially promulgated – with more or less success – certain traits of U.S. higher education in other parts of the world: Privatizing higher education, achieving more differentiated systems, creating entrepreneurial universities, fostering competition both within and between institutions – all of these and others have served as maxims for the reform discourse in many countries, with an implicit or often explicit reference to the model nature of American higher education⁴³.

This development has some paradoxical elements. First, as national systems of higher education go, the U.S. “system”, for all its obvious accomplishments, is probably the most idiosyncratic and least “comparable” system in today’s world; few other systems have an even remotely similar degree of differentiation and selectivity, and the existence of a prestigious private sector in higher education is almost unique in the world. Second, and the constant invocation of American models for higher education reform elsewhere notwithstanding, the U.S. system stands out internationally as being remarkably devoid of any significant system-wide reform in recent times⁴⁴, especially when compared to the rather sweeping winds of change that have transformed, or are in the process of transforming, higher education in such countries as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, or Germany.

⁴² Fallon 1980.

⁴³ Clark 1998; Muller 1996; Weiler 2002.

⁴⁴ Notwithstanding such developments as the groundswell of curricular innovations that Martha Nussbaum (1997) reviews.

Partly as a result of these paradoxes, and partly as a reflection of a more diffuse distrust of American precepts, the invocation of U.S. models in the higher education reform discourse in such countries as Germany has typically engendered a considerable, and mounting, degree of controversy. It would be worth a separate paper to trace this controversy in the German case, from its fairly innocuous beginnings in meetings of German and American university administrators⁴⁵ to more recent indictments of the “infatuation with America” (“Amerikaseligkeit”⁴⁶) in the reform discourse – notably well before the onset and the ramifications of the Iraq conflict.

3.5 Ambivalence about the role of students

In my own experience, students – whether at Stanford or at Frankfurt/Oder – have certainly been the most exciting part of spending a lifetime at universities – almost always more exciting than professors. As institutions, however, universities are far more ambivalent about students. They proclaim their unceasing dedication to the welfare and enlightenment of their students, but also moan about the students’ constant claims on the institution’s attention and resources. They, the universities, keep professing the importance of teaching as a criterion of good academic citizenship, and yet – again at Stanford as well as at Frankfurt (Oder) – recruit, promote, and reward their faculty primarily on the basis of their research productivity.

I am neither terribly fond of, nor particularly knowledgeable about, psychoanalytic theory, but I can’t help being struck by the obvious parallel between this kind of institutional behavior and what people like Roszika Parker (1996, 1997) have had to say about “maternal ambivalence”, where “loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side” (1997, 17). [Just to be on the safe side, let me hasten

⁴⁵ Müller-Böling 1998.

⁴⁶ In the words of one of the most prominent (and thoughtful) critics of this kind of infatuation, the former state secretary of higher education for the state of Saxony, Hans Joachim Meyer.

to add that there is, as Stephen Frosh shows, such a thing as *paternal* ambivalence as well; Frosh speaks of

the specific complexity of the ambivalence surrounding fathering: to father a child requires something other than the traditional boundary-setting and prohibitive stance; but to reach out in a loving way requires a shift of masculine consciousness, involving not just some more gentleness but a whole gamut of alterations in relations of dependency, intimacy, vulnerability and trust. On the whole, the more fragile masculinity becomes, the more desperately men cling to its vestiges, doing the opposite of what fathering requires. (1997, 50-51)]

I do not want to carry the psychoanalysis of the university too far in the direction of parental ambivalence, but some of the parallels are, indeed, striking.

Even without recourse to psychoanalysis, however, students remain an important object and source of ambivalence in higher education. Two current developments in German higher education highlight the point. In the debate about the introduction of consecutive degree programs along the BA/MA model, which is primarily geared to allow for a substantive revision and improvement of the content of study and thus to upgrade the importance of teaching in the university, there is a striking incidence of the view, especially among faculty, that this reform will allow for the “sorting out” of large numbers of less qualified students after a first degree, and for concentrating on the worthy few that make it into a second-level (MA) degree program. Once again, there is substantial contradiction between the goals of a new policy and the way it is perceived and interpreted by a key constituency.

A similar tension surrounds the current debate on the right of universities to select their own students. This claim is now being pursued vigorously by several German state governments and has just a few weeks ago found a preliminary

and as yet somewhat half-way endorsement in the Permanent Conference of Ministers of Education (KMK), the consultative body charged with coordinating state policies at the federal level. If implemented, which is likely, the new procedure would mark the beginning of the end of a centralized system of allocating admissions solely on the basis of a student's final high school grade point average. It can safely be predicted that a more important role of the universities in the selection of their own students will in time lead to a more differentiated system of higher education with a much closer match between a student's abilities and interests and the university's special capabilities and "profile".

Here again, however, a policy that seems to serve the best interests of the universities is greeted with considerable ambivalence. While the advantages of such a selection system are duly acknowledged, both the amount of work involved in making it work and the resulting differentiation of a system that still clings to the time-honored myth of equal quality across all universities cause rather serious apprehensions.

4. Whence ambivalence?

These instances have been selected from a much wider range of possible examples in order to illustrate the rather pervasive element of ambivalence that seems to characterize the cultural habitat of academia in general, and in Germany, in particular. There are other examples, such as the ambivalence about the meaning of institutional democracy in higher education, or about whether or not the university should involve itself in social issues, or the ambivalence over centralization and decentralization in academic governance. All of these, taken together, do indeed convey the image of an institution that is profoundly at odds with itself.

The question is: why would this be so?

At least one answer to this question has to do with the last part of the argument that was stated at the outset of this article: the ambivalence of universities is a fairly accurate reflection of the fact that both the state and society tend to have profoundly ambivalent orientations towards higher education. The major dimension of this ambivalence has to do with the kinds of purposes that state and society consider appropriate for the university; this dimension varies – or rather: oscillates – between reaffirming the independence of the university in its pursuit of knowledge and invoking the right of society to have the university contribute to the solution of a society’s problems. This is probably true in the U.S. as well as in Germany and other countries, except that in the U.S. the state, as in everything else, plays much less of a role in articulating norms regarding the purposes of higher education – notable exceptions, such as affirmative action, notwithstanding.

Faced with this contextual ambivalence about its own purposes, the universities themselves see no particular reason to overcome what for them seems to be a natural – or at least very comfortable – tendency towards an academic and cognitive culture that is in its turn profoundly ambivalent about its own identity and purpose. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the university has developed into the kind of profoundly ambivalent institution that this article has sought to describe.

The ambivalence of society towards its universities is something that figured already in Robert Merton’s concerns⁴⁷. It has to do with the tension between society’s deeply rooted respect for scholarship and scholars, on the one hand, and a similarly deep-seated doubt whether they really deserve the perks, the freedoms and the resources they receive.

⁴⁷ Merton 1976, pp. 32ff.

There is, however, a more subtle and more recent kind of ambivalence in the society's perception of its universities, and that has to do with different conceptions of knowledge and its utility. Here there reigns, on the one hand, the time-honored notion of the academy as the place where knowledge is being pursued for its own sake. On the other hand, there prevails – in its crassest form – what has come to be known as the notion of shareholder value. In this kind of ambivalent perspective, scholars are at once seen as independent high priests of knowledge, or as public servants of whom certain outcomes are expected. In Germany in particular, one would find a sizeable accumulation of views on either side of this continuum, even though the scale seems to have recently tipped in favor of the shareholder value side.

As far as the state is concerned, its ambivalence toward universities is even more pronounced and, in some instances, quite bizarre. In the German case and in some other European countries, the state constantly vacillates between regulation and deregulation, between control and autonomy, between the high-risk/high-gain dynamic of reform and the relatively comfortable and safe maintenance of the status quo.

But beyond that, there is a kind of ambivalence that seems to border on downright duplicity. Here I am coming back to German variant of the issue of autonomy, where I had already pointed out a fairly conspicuous movement in the direction of letting universities handle their own affairs more independently of the state. That, ostensibly, would go for the management of financial resources as well, and there is talk and quite a bit of action about block grant budgets – “Globalhaushalte” – in which universities would receive a certain amount of money to do with as they see fit. That sounds, at first sight, like a fairly reasonable implementation of the principle of autonomy. Except for one thing: in every case of globalizing university budgets that I know about, universities lose a sizeable chunk of the money they had before. The question is whether there is really a political concept of greater institutional autonomy at work – or just a

skilful minister of finance having found another way of balancing a precariously imbalanced budget? The correct answer is probably, both of the above, and amounts to yet another indication of the profound ambivalence with which the state views universities.

One other thought needs to be added to this reflection on the relationship between the state and universities, hopefully without the risk of becoming an accessory to yet another conspiracy theory. For beyond the question of specific policies like block grant budgets, there is something quite delicate about this relationship between universities and the state. That delicacy has to do with what, in some of my earlier work, I have described as a relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power⁴⁸. In this relationship, knowledge and power legitimate each other such that knowledge becomes an important source of legitimacy for a given order of political authority (as in the role of scholarly expertise in establishing the credibility of government policies) while, at the same time, an important part of the legitimacy of certain kinds of knowledge derives from political decisions about qualifications for professional employment, standards of public contracting, and the acceptance of expertise. If this is so, it imposes such a significant burden on the relationship between state and universities that it might well account for at least some of the ambivalence of the relationship: While the state depends on the university at least in part for generating and sustaining the legitimacy of its authority, the university in its turn depends on the state at least in part for the legitimation of its knowledge product.

Thus, for a whole variety of reasons, both society and the state are rather ambivalent in their relationship to, and their conception of the purposes of, the university. Is it at all surprising, then, that universities have developed ambivalence into an art form of their own, and that universities define themselves

⁴⁸ Weiler 2001b.

in ways that maximize the strategic utility of ambivalence for the pursuit of their own goals?

It works very nicely: If universities do not like the troubles and frustrations of social involvement, they insist that their primary task is the disinterested search for truth. If, on the other hand and under different circumstances, the search for truth seems too ascetic and unrewarding, the involvement in the social issue *du jour* may provide a welcome distraction.

If lucrative contracts or grants from outside the university beckon, it is useful to remind everybody that the state has to leave the university with enough discretion to avail itself of such opportunities. If, at less opulent times, the effort to raise outside resources under the competitive conditions of the open funding market appears to be too burdensome, the role of the state as the legitimate provider of the university's wherewithal is duly emphasized.

Nor can the universities necessarily be blamed for making use of these degrees of freedom that their environment so invitingly grants them. They act, in some sense, perfectly rational. If state and society had similarly ambivalent attitudes about civil aviation or public utilities (and, as we know, sometimes they have), airlines and utility companies would probably do the same, or at least try.

Is this a bad situation or a good situation, or does it matter? Is what Stephen Frosh says about the relationship of fathers to their children - "Certainty is almost always destructive; ambivalence has many positive attributes."⁴⁹ – true for universities as well? Is, in a situation where markets become more important than state patronage, ambivalence no longer "the enemy at the gate", as Zygmunt Bauman claims?

The answer, unfortunately, is far from clear.

⁴⁹ Frosh 1997, p. 52.

At its best, ambivalence in academia provides the very space for alternative answers without which the process of inquiry would remain a rather sterile affair.

At its worst, ambivalence provides a comfortable excuse to avoid asking the hard questions and finding the hard answers.

There is, alas, ambivalence even in analyzing ambivalence.

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