National Unification, Global Competition and Institutional Reform: The Dynamics of Change in Higher Education

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These lectures were given, together with a number of less formal seminars, during a visit to South Africa designed to discuss with interested partners questions of change in higher education. The author is very grateful to the institutions that have made this visit possible and to the many colleagues who gave freely of their time for a most informative set of exchanges. Thanks are due in particular to Jonathan Jansen and Nico Cloete for having arranged a very productive program of meetings and visits in different parts of the country.

The principal purpose of this talk is to show how national unification, global competition, and institutional reform produce and direct change in higher education. Putting it this way, you might think that I would be talking about South Africa, but I will not – mainly because I know as yet too little about it, even though I am learning fast (from, *inter alia*, such important analyses as Cloete, Maassen et al. 2006 or Jansen 2008). I will instead talk first a little about Germany, about which I know more, as both an insider and an outsider. I do this not because I consider Germany to be all that spectacularly important (even though some Germans think so), but because I consider the process of change that has occurred in German higher education over the past twenty years – roughly since unification in 1990 – to be an exceptionally interesting and instructive case study in how systems of higher education change – and don't change at the same time.

This is not, however, a talk about Germany, but about change in higher education, and I will move on from the German case study to a broader discussion of the kinds of issues for which the German case is so instructive - issues such as autonomy, differentiation, quality, governance, equity, competition, democracy, and accountability. For this broader discussion, I do not only draw on the German example, but on my observations of other systems of higher education as well (Weiler 2008), including my own, the American system – and I may even here or there, with all due caution, refer to some of the discussions I have had in South Africa during my visit.

Let's start (I) by briefly recapitulating what happened in German higher education between 1989, the year the Berlin wall came down, and today. I will do this by trying to capture, in a number of summary observations, the principal characteristics of that transition. I will follow this (II) with a brief look at the university in former East Germany with which I was associated for six years and which highlights some of the trends that I will be talking about. I will then (III) move away from the German case and discuss four major issues of change (and non-change) in higher education more generally – autonomy, legitimacy, knowledge, and difference[1]. In a fourth section (IV) I take up more explicitly the title of this talk again and look at the relationship between national unification, global competition, and institutional reform, and I conclude (V) by returning to the role of universities at what I see as a particularly critical juncture in history.

I
The transition of German higher education, 1989-2008: Fifteen observations about twenty years of change and non-change

1990 was an eventful year for both Europe and South Africa. I don't have to tell you why 1990, and the 2nd of February in particular, was important in South Africa. In Europe, after 45 years of separation, East Germany (known as the GDR) and West Germany (the FRG) were re-united in 1990, following the wave of opposition to state socialist regimes that swept through Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s and culminated in 1989. For someone interested in higher education, what did this momentous political, social, and economic transition mean? The short answer is: at first remarkably little, but a good deal more as time went on. The somewhat longer, but still condensed answer comes in 15 observations:

1. Prior to unification, in the lat 1980s, West German higher education was generally considered as having reached a point of decay that seemed to make reform truly imperative.

2. Contrary to many expectations (and maybe hopes), German unification did *not* serve as a catalyst for a major reform of higher education in either East or West Germany, at least not directly.

3. German unification in higher education, as in so many other realms of public life, was much less a process of the integration of two systems and much more a process of accession and of superimposing one system (the West German one) over another one (the East German system).

4. Somewhat perversely, unification created a false sense of the superiority of the West German system of higher education ("now we know: the better system won").

[1] For reasons of time, the last of these was omitted in my talk in Cape Town.

5. On balance, unification at first retarded rather than advanced the cause of change in German higher education. That had to do with the sheer magnitude of the logistical task of making the East German system function again, but also with a general reluctance to face more basic questions about the future of higher education at the time.

6. One of the exports from West German into East German higher education was a prevailing suspicion of reform, especially among the professoriate.

7. It was only in the second half of the 1990s that criticism of the status quo and a significant momentum for reform in German higher education emerged again (captured in Peter Glotz' [1996] famous observation that the system was "rotten to the core" – *im Kern verrottet*, and in Jürgen Mittelstrass' thesis [1993] that the German universities were "incapable of reform" -*reformunfähig*).

8. When the reform movement of the late nineties finally took shape, it owed its emergence to a coalition that consisted of a few farsighted politicians, some increasingly strong concerns in the business community over the competitiveness of German higher education, a critical mass of progressive university presidents, and the support of a number of major foundations (notably Volkswagen and Bertelsmann).

9. The progress of the reform movement was supported by a number of circumstances, including a major fiscal crisis that made moves towards greater efficiency in higher education imperative (and, coincidentally, made transferring the management of shortages to the universities an attractive option for the state), and a growing apprehension about a significant lag in comparative development indicators for German higher education (OECD).

10. The major opposition to the reform came from the university professoriate and from some parts of the student population; the professoriate was primarily opposed to changes in governance and in the handling of professorial property rights, while the students' opposition was almost exclusively focused on the issue of tuition fees.

11. The key elements of the changes envisaged by the reform movement were the external and internal governance arrangements for German universities, i.e., the relationship between universities and the state, on the one hand, and the transformation of internal arrangements for decision-making and resource allocation, on the other.

12. The move towards greater competitiveness within the system of higher education raised, as it did elsewhere, the salience of such issues as quality control and institutional efficiency.

13. A relatively later, and so far rather half-hearted phase of the reform is the restructuration of university curricula under the auspices of the Europe-wide "Bologna Plan" and in the form of consecutive degree programs (BA, MA, PhD).

14. Even more recently, the reform process has effectively shattered the myth that all universities are created equal, and are just as good or as bad as any other, by initiating a competition for both excellence in reputation and significant additional research funding through the "Excellence Initiative", conducted over the last two years and resulting in the designation of nine German universities as standing out from the rest.

15. Other steps on the reform agenda included the introduction, on a very modest scale, of performance-based compensation for professors, the creation of junior professorships to facilitate entry into the professoriate, and the introduction of modest tuition fees in some of the German Länder. None of those, for reasons that would be interesting to discuss, has as yet produced the kinds of changes that were intended.

II
Starting a new university in an old system: Viadrina European University in Frankfurt (Oder)

One small piece of this transition process was a remarkable little university at the far Eastern end of the newly united Germany – Viadrina European University in a medium size town called Frankfurt – but not the big Frankfurt/Main, but a much smaller town on the Oder River, the river that marks the boundary between Germany and Poland.

That university is remarkable for three reasons:

1) It is one of only two really new universities in what used to be East Germany; it was really started from scratch, with two rooms and a cell phone.

2) It was designed and established as a "European" university, though not in the sense of the much smaller EU that existed in 1990 and ended right on the Oder river, but in terms of a new and much larger Europe that was at that point at best a distant hope – a Europe in which Frankfurt and the Viadrina university would no longer be sitting at the Eastern edge of the old Europe, but right in the middle of a new Europe that would include Poland and the rest of Central Europe.
It was therefore perfectly consistent that the university had a special mandate to build (or re-build) an intellectual bridge between Germany and Poland – I have once called it (borrowing a phrase from Simon and Garfunkel) "a bridge over troubled waters" in consideration of the very troubled history of relations between the two countries, from the various "divisions" of Poland over the centuries at the hands of Germany and Russia to the horrors of the Warsaw Ghetto.

3) The Viadrina's third claim to fame in higher education was a rather serious attempt at interdisciplinary teaching and research, notably through the creation of a School of Cultural Studies (which we somewhat presumptuously labeled the "new Frankfurt school") in which the social sciences and the humanities were to pursue jointly the comparative study of culture and cultural change in a period and a region of rapid social, economic and political transformation.

There are some who might argue that the fourth thing that was noteworthy about the Viadrina University was the fact that it hired Hans Weiler as its first Rektor or President. That's exaggerated, of course, but then it was not entirely to be taken for granted that somebody would leave a comfortable and well-endowed professorship at Stanford University in beautiful Northern California to move to a somewhat less than attractive city in the then rather downtrodden Eastern part of Germany.

But that's what I did in 1993, after having worked in an advisory capacity on the conception of the university, and that's where I staid until reaching my mandatory retirement age six years later – and where I spent the six most exciting years of my professional life. Perhaps I owe you a brief word of explanation on why I did this, what I expected, and what I found out. There were basically two considerations.

First, it is rare that an exciting point in history comes together with an exciting point in the geography – but such was indeed the case on that border between Germany and Poland in the wake of the peaceful revolution in Central Europe in 1989/90. Rarely could one have such a palpable feeling that an old incarnation of Europe had come to an end, and a new one was about to take shape. I just found the prospect of being an active part of that transition extraordinarily attractive and absolutely irresistible.

The other reason had more to do with my interest in how educational institutions change. Again, it is rare that one has the chance of creating a new institution, and I believed (somewhat naively as it turned out) that starting a university from scratch would provide a unique opportunity to demonstrate what a new and modern type of university could be like – and that we could produce something like a pilot project for a broader reform of German higher education.

I could spend the whole evening talking about what happened to those two expectations, and why, but here is the brief version:

My first expectation was more than amply fulfilled. It often was a troublesome experience – especially

- dealing with the skepticism of a local population who were openly wondering what they should do with a university when what they really needed was jobs, or

- dealing with the intense culture conflicts between a largely West German professoriate and a largely East German staff, or – particularly painful –
- dealing with members of the university staff who were suspected of having collaborated with the East German secret service, or, more generally,
- coping with the very different pasts that West German and East German staff brought to their work.

But in spite of all that, and in many ways because of that, it was an extremely exciting time as Europe moved into a new era (one which it still is trying to get its hands around), and a very exciting place to become deeply involved in a new phase of German-Polish relations, where our German and Polish students anticipated and modeled that new relationship every day right on our campus.

My second expectation about pioneering change in German higher education – well, that was another story. I clearly had overestimated the degrees of freedom that a single institution would have to overcome the inertia, the suspicions, and the property rights embedded in the pre-existing West German system of higher education that had annexed East German universities. And I had certainly underestimated how having to operate in the existing legal structure of German higher education and with a professoriate that had its socialization in that system created a cumulative blockage that was very hard to overcome. I began to learn my lesson when, in one of my first meetings with the Academic Senate, I innocently floated the proposal to distribute 10 percent of the university's non-personnel budget not, as was customary, in equal allotments to each department and chair, but by using indicators of load and performance. The resulting outcry of indignation would have been enough to send me all the way back to California had I not in a long life learned a thing or two about how to deal with institutional adversity.

III
Critical issues in the transformation of higher education

So much for our excursion into the real world of change and non-change in higher education and into Hans Weiler's biography. But we need to return to the hard work of understanding what change in higher education really is, and what some of its key issues are. Against the background of both my work on the politics of knowledge and my experience in institutions of higher education in several different systems, I have singled out four issues that I would like to discuss in a little more detail:

Autonomy
Legitimacy
Knowledge
Difference

I am sure there is more to be said about change in higher education than is captured in these four issues, but they are sufficiently important to serve well for a start. For each of them, I will advance a set of propositions that I consider important stepping stones on our way to a better theoretical grasp of change in higher education.

1) Autonomy

a) One of the important elements in the process of change in higher education consists of a shift in the balance between individual and institutional autonomy.

b) One of the principal effects as well as indicators of institutional autonomy is the emergence and steering power of specific missions and agendas for institutions of higher education.

There is, in Europe as elsewhere, a hallowed tradition of the autonomy of the individual scholar and professor, often couched in terms of freedom of teaching and inquiry. As the institutional autonomy of the university from intervention by the state increases, increasing at the same time its ability to shape, consolidate and pursue an institutional agenda of its own, the individual autonomy of the professor gets challenged; it is difficult, if not impossible, to marshal a university's resources in the pursuit of a specific institutional agenda while every professor retains the right to do as she or he pleases. This tension, I believe, is at the very heart of the conflictual institutional dynamics of change in higher education today. Putting it slightly different: There is little point in struggling (as I and others have done in Germany for the last fifteen years or so) for greater university autonomy from the state if that institutional autonomy is then held hostage from within by professors that, in the name of individual autonomy, insist on total independence in setting their scholarly agenda – regardless of the specific mission of their university.

[Let me say here in parentheses that I am well aware of the debate on this issue in South Africa, captured very well in the final version of the CHE report on "Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in South African Higher Education" (CHE 2008). Much as I appreciate both the thoroughness of the report and the circumstances which have prompted its production, I do ask myself whether this perspective does not suffer from somewhat overestimating the invasive tendencies of the state and underestimating the evasive tendencies of the professoriate.]

c) There is a close and inseparable linkage between autonomy and accountability in higher education.

There is no politically responsible way of expanding the autonomy of universities without expanding their responsibility for being held accountable for how well

they serve their purpose. Universities are extraordinarily expensive and extraordinarily important institutions for the welfare of both the world of knowledge and a given society; they deserve and need their autonomy as a means of mobilizing their best ideas and energies, but they owe the society that supports them a commensurate degree of accountability. That tension, again, is at the heart of the politics of change in higher education. And that tension exists both between the state and the universities and between the university and its members: To the extent that the state grants universities greater autonomy, it has to see to it that they are being held accountable to the society at large for how they use their expanded freedom. Similarly, to the extent that the professoriate allows the university and its leadership a certain degree of encroachment on the limitless exercise of their individual autonomy, the university's leadership is accountable to the professoriate for its stewardship of the university's collective mission.

d) Autonomy from state intervention is only part of the autonomy story; the other part is autonomy from market interference (in either case, autonomy does not mean separation – higher education separates itself from both the state and the market at its own peril).

There is considerable risk (documented in a growing literature, not least in the U.S.) that universities gain greater autonomy from state supervision only to become more dependent on, and influenced by, market forces that seek to control a university's output in both training and knowledge creation. Recent developments in public higher education in the US are a case in point. Universities do need to maintain a functioning relationship with both the state and the market without becoming a willing tool of either.

2) Legitimacy

a) Given their precarious position in contemporary societies and their extraordinary resource needs, legitimacy is a salient (and generally underestimated) concern for institutions of higher education; they cannot afford to take their own legitimacy for granted. Here again, recent developments in the U.S. are a case in point: the state's and especially the federal government's attempts to intervene in key university decisions such as the setting of tuition fees and the handling of university endowments have been greeted with widespread popular and legislative support, indicating a less than unquestioned level of legitimacy for the country's higher education institutions and their autonomy.

b) The legitimacy of higher education institutions is further endangered by their tenuous relationship with the nation state in the face of the growing internationalization and globalization of knowledge production. Transnational forms of legitimating higher education (as in comparative reputational measures)

become an increasingly important added or substitute source of institutional legitimacy, while a university's contribution to the knowledge needs and the welfare of its own society appears to lose currency in that competition.

c) As university systems redefine their relationship with both the state and the society and economy at large, new patterns and models of legitimating university leadership emerge. This has led in some countries, including Germany, to the construct of "dual legitimation" where university leadership is the joint result of an internal and an external nomination and appointment process; university presidents are nominated by an outside body representing the society at large, and are elected by an internal organ such as the Academic Senate[2], thus maximizing both the external and the internal legitimacy of their role.

d) As part of the same process, conventional models of participatory decision-making within universities are giving way to mixed forms of governance in which participatory forms of decision making are merged with managerial (or "entrepreneurial") decision models. These mergers often have a rather uneasy quality, predicated as they are on different logics of empowerment. There dos, however, not seem to exist an alternative to such mixed governance arrangements if universities are to be both democratic and effective.

e) The development of higher education in recent years, besides reflecting real change in some instances, also often reaffirms earlier theories of compensatory legitimation (Weiler 1983) where creating the appearance of reform and change serves the purpose of legitimating political regimes even in the absence of real change.

3) Knowledge

a) One of the puzzles in studying contemporary reforms in higher education is how much attention is given to questions of structure, access, governance and financing, and how little to the substance of what is being taught, learned, and researched in higher education.

b) The key question underlying this neglected domain of higher education content is: What kind of knowledge is worth teaching and discovering, and why? Even though higher education is presumably all about knowledge, it is striking how little attention this question receives in the study of higher education – notable exceptions, some of them here represented, notwithstanding. I have recently argued, against the background of these deficits, to make "the science of knowledge" a compulsory subject both in upper secondary school and in the canon of introductory undergraduate education in college.

[2] The roles are sometimes reversed, depending on the specific legal arrangements, but the principle is the same.

c) The issue of quality is a case in point: Although omnipresent in the higher education discourse, there is far too little recognition that the question of what kind of quality matters is largely a question of what kind of knowledge matters: the metrics of quality, in other words, reflect conceptions of knowledge. Ancillary or utilitarian conceptions of knowledge lead to certain notions of quality, more autonomous conceptions of knowledge to others.

d) We describe and occasionally deplore the persistence of epistemological and disciplinary orthodoxies in our universities, but we seem to be much less aware than we should be of the kinds of power structures that, all interdisciplinary rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, keep these orthodoxies in place: Publishing hegemonies, associational politics, self-perpetuating personnel strategies, funding priorities and patterns of peer review – to name just some of the most important ones.

e) The standing of the humanities in higher education suffers not only from the rising and competing demand for science and technology, but also from a striking lack of comprehension and imagination regarding the role of the humanities in modern, technological, multicultural and globalized societies: the ethics of economic decisions, intercultural comprehension, assessing the significance of knowledge in the midst of virtually limitless information, understanding the cultures of institutions (not least schools and universities) are some of the key areas badly in need of a renovated analytical capacity of the humanities.

4) Differences

a) As we observe systems and institutions of higher education, we keep encountering differences of various kinds, but we do not seem to have much of a conceptual handle on how to understand and how to assess them. There obviously is a growing difference in the *quality* (or at least the reputation) of institutions nationally and internationally, partly due to a more competitive climate in higher education. At the same time, as Frans van Vught and others have observed, the differences between *types* of higher education institutions shrink: almost all institutions now become “universities” (in Germany, the *Fachhochschulen*, originally a second tier in the system of higher education, have become “universities of applied sciences”, and I have read about similar developments in South Africa).

In one sense, this decreasing differentiation runs counter to the development of modern labor markets where not only the level of required qualifications, but also the range of required skills are increasing.

b) This dilemma is exacerbated, at least to judge from the experience of countries like Germany, by the growing obsolescence of traditional forms of occupation-bound vocational education and by the increasingly apparent need

for a more abstract, “transportable” and “learning-to-learn” kind of vocational education of the kind that a good community college might offer.

c) But this is only one, and not even the most difficult, part of dealing with differences in higher education. At least as challenging is the task of reconciling the unavoidable pressure for greater differentiation in both quality and functionality (not all institutions can be equally good, and different institutions do have to serve different functions) with the equally imperative social mandate of providing a reasonable degree of equity, or at least of equal opportunity, in a society. I would argue that there is nothing necessarily or inherently inequitable about a differentiated system of higher education, but higher education in the United States shows how persistently, in spite of significant measures to the contrary (e.g., need-blind admission), social hierarchies are reproduced in the different tiers of the higher education system (Carnevale and Rose 2003).

Even though the connection is not a law of nature, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that more competitive systems of higher education (competitive along both external and internal dimensions) do tend to be more inequitable in terms of both access and success than less competitive systems.

IV
National Unification, Global Competition and Institutional Reform

Let me now return once more to the theme of this talk – to the interaction between national unification, global competition, and institutional reform. In a variety of ways, I have already paraphrased this theme in the previous sections, but I still owe you some more explicit observations.

You did not need my lecture to understand that national unification for Germany was a major event when it (rather suddenly and, at least for the West, rather unexpectedly) occurred in 1989, and turned into a major challenge over the years that followed. National unification came about and presented itself in South Africa in very different ways, but was at least as much of a historical watershed, and at least as much of a challenge, as it was in Germany.

As I have already suggested, higher education had little to do with bringing about national unification in Germany; as the democracy movement in East Germany began to take shape and then – courageously and peacefully – took to the streets of Leipzig, the East German universities were not part of it, even if individual students and faculty were. At the same time, as I have tried to show, the *effect* of unification on higher education was strictly limited to the *East* German universities which were incorporated (some would say and have said “colonized”) into the pre-existing West German system. That system continued on in its merry old ways, even defying for a while longer the pressures for reform that had built up prior to unification.

I have by now learned enough about South Africa to understand that, on the one hand, higher education institutions (at least some of them) did play and continue to play a significant role in bringing about the end of apartheid or national disunity, and that, on the other hand, South Africa's higher education system was, and continues to be, affected in major ways by the ongoing unification of the country as well as by the problems that this process of unification still faces. I still venture the proposition that what I am about to say about the relationship between national unification, global competition, and institutional reform applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to many different countries, including both Germany and South Africa.

My thesis on this triangular relationship between national unification, global competition, and institutional change in higher education argues that global competition in its various forms is fast becoming a much more powerful determinant of change in higher education than national unification or the search for national unity, and that this is a cause for serious concern and action.

My thesis has a great deal to do with what, in some of my earlier work, I have described as the international politics of knowledge (Weiler 2001; 2006). That notion, as some of you may recall, is predicated on the emergence of an international knowledge order that has erected its own scaffolding of power relationships – with powerful centers of agenda-setting, support, and dissemination of research largely located in the north of the international system – my own university in the U.S. being prominently among them. That international knowledge order has formed its own coalitions, where institutions like the World Bank figure prominently, and it has also found an increasingly perceptible and effective opposition. That opposition has its institutional anchors such as CODESRIA[3], or several of the institutions in this country such as CHET[4], and it has its prominent and eloquent individual voices such as those of Ashis Nandy from India (2000), Pablo Gonzalez Casanova from Mexico (1981), or Paulin Hountondji from Benin (1997; 2002), but also Clifford Geertz (1983) and Stephen Greenblatt (1991) in the US. It also has its international support structure in the form of institutions like SIDA/SAREC in Sweden, IDRC in Canada, or some agencies of private philanthropy.

I resist the temptation of entering into this discussion again (see Weiler 2006), except to emphasize for purposes of our argument here what a powerful determinant of change in higher education this international knowledge order has become, and how the globalized competition for scholars, for talented students, for resources, and for reputation has driven many of the changes that I have discussed in this presentation.

[3] www.codesria.org
[4] www.chet.org.za

Just take the issue of quality assessment and quality control that looms so large in much of the contemporary discourse on higher education – certainly in Germany and, I know, in South Africa as well. Now there is obviously nothing wrong with being concerned with quality in higher education; the striking thing about this discourse, however, is that it is increasingly and even primarily defined in terms of international competition, epitomized by the by now ubiquitous rankings of universities coming out of Shanghai, London, or New York. Defining the quality of higher education in these globalized terms is profoundly different from defining quality in higher education in terms of its "fit" with the knowledge needs and values of the institution's more immediate local or national environment or, for that matter, the cause of national unification.

National and institutional emphases on selectivity, international visibility, and globally recognized indices of reputation reflect the dynamics of the international knowledge system rather than the more specific and limited needs of country and region. Germany's meager, but emphatic entry into this world of international competition through the recent "Excellence Initiative" for supporting internationally competitive research at a few German universities is a case in point; significantly, none of the nine universities emerging victorious from this competition lies in Eastern Germany – so much for higher education and national unification! And it is clear from looking both at the websites of leading South African universities and at the work of people like Anastassios Pouris of the University of Pretoria (2007) that the impact of this kind of globalized competition has left its mark on South African higher education as well.

There is no point in denying that this powerful international knowledge order has become an important part of our life in higher education. To deny it would mean neglecting an important parameter of our work. But it would be highly problematic for higher education institutions to regard this globalized competitive environment as the *only* appropriate parameter for a proper role of universities. To put it more bluntly: It is high time that universities, in the North and in the South, become more active and self-conscious participants in the struggle for a more balanced order of knowledge creation and for the authenticity of knowledge. By that I mean a pursuit of knowledge that is cognizant of both the global dimension of knowledge creation and of the importance of local, national and regional knowledge traditions. The real challenge facing our universities in this situation is to understand the nature of the international knowledge system and its competitive pressures, while at the same time understand and re-affirm the specific cultural context within which knowledge is defined, produced and interpreted.

Meeting this challenge would also re-connect higher education to a particularly important item on the agenda of national unification: the creation and the nurturing of a national identity of knowledge that both recognizes the power and the inevitability of the international knowledge order*and* serves as a catalyst for re-legitimating local and national traditions of knowledge. I have looked with

interest at the South African governments efforts to re-kindle the study of "indigenous knowledge"; there is a certain danger in these efforts to idealize folklore, but they are a step in the right direction on a road that needs to go much further. If the East German experience provides any suggestions in this regard, it is the importance of coming to terms with the narratives of the past as held by different groups of the population.

I know that quite a few institutions of higher education, including several in this country, are already facing up to that challenge. That transition to a new and more encompassing role of universities, however, is far from accomplished. Indeed, it is very much in its infancy, and faces the powerful paradigm of an increasingly homogeneous global knowledge order.

V
Ceterum censeo: Universities as ambivalent institutions

Achieving such a more wholesome and balanced role in the world of knowledge also faces a peculiar condition of many higher education institutions that has puzzled me for some time: The profound ambivalence with which universities tend to view their own identity and purpose. Since I consider this ambivalence as a sometimes convenient, but ultimately counterproductive condition of universities in their quest for a clear and unambiguous role in society, I will address this concern in the final part of this talk.

There is indeed a profound ambivalence when it comes to institutions of higher education. As one looks around, one finds that, to different degrees in different locations, universities are ambivalent

- 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 "managerial" 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,
- 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.

The only thing universities seem to be *un*ambivalent about is their resistance to outside judgments about their ambivalence.

I have shown elsewhere (Weiler 2005) how this notion of institutional ambivalence (which owes a great deal to the work of Robert Merton [1976] and of Zygmunt Bauman [1991]) fits remarkably well the process of change in German higher education that I have described earlier. The important question, however, is why this should be so – why, in other words, ambivalence is such a fitting construct to capture the nature of change in institutions of higher education.

The answer to this question lies, I think, in the nature of the relationship between universities and their societies, which is itself an ambivalent relationship. The ambivalence of universities, in other words, 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 purposes that state and society consider appropriate for the university; this dimension oscillates between, on the one hand, reaffirming the independence of the university in its pursuit of knowledge and, on the other hand, invoking the right of society to have the university contribute to the solution of a society's problems.

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 the independent high priests of knowledge, and as public servants of whom the production of certain outcomes can be duly expected. In most of the countries I know, 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 many 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.

Even beyond the question of specific policies, 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 power (Weiler 2001). 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 public 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 that 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 in ways that maximize the strategic utility of ambivalence for the pursuit of their own goals?

It works, if you look at it more closely, 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 demanding, 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 once again duly emphasized.

Nor can one really blame the universities 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.

The question is, however, whether this luxury of ambivalence is really sustainable in our time. At important and critical junctures in history, there is in my view a limit to the degree of ambivalence that one can responsibly condone. Institutions, just like people, sometimes have to make up their mind – however convenient it may be to sit on the fence. I believe the universities of this world face such a critical juncture today, as the globalization of knowledge is moving inexorably towards an ever stronger monopoly of defining what kinds of knowledge are worth producing and disseminating.

Ambivalence as to whether or not this is a good thing is no longer defensible. It is time to stand up and be counted. For universities, that means the end of some of their ambivalence, and it means to identify much more unambiguously with the knowledge traditions of their countries and regions, and with their societies' ways of knowing.

This does not call for universities to become knowledge museums where one preserves the treasured wisdom of past generations like so many old chairs or sewing machines in a Museum of American History. What it does mean is two things: first, for universities to undertake a much greater effort to both identify and serve the knowledge needs of their own societies, and not to accept automatically one of the creeds of globalization: that those needs become more similar across different societies all the time – because they don't. One of the casualties of our obsession with the standardizing mode of league tables and similar instruments is the careful inquiry into what very specific kinds of knowledge the health, the settlements, the environment, the cultural institutions, the politics of our societies need. Perhaps what we need, at least as a compensatory instrument, is league tables of relevance.

Secondly, it means for universities to become a lively and vibrant forum for openly and candidly analyzing, debating and disseminating the knowledge and understanding of our own past – the past of apartheid South Africa as much as the past of racism in America or the past of the Nazi holocaust and the autocratic regime of East Germany. For our universities to be committed to what I have called the authenticity of knowledge means not to give in to the temptations and pressures of the international knowledge order, but to revitalize the histories, the narratives, the languages, the life sciences of our very own cultural traditions.

There is a powerful dynamic in the triangle of globalization, national identity, and institutional change. But we have to remain in control of that dynamic.

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