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## Corporate University: A Critical Approach<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The ability of a university to educate students to be responsible and informed citizens in the future has been undercut by the market-inspired, neoliberal attempts to commercialize universities and to turn them into suppliers of proprietary knowledge. The paper focuses on a critique of the ongoing erosion of an important cultural function performed until very recently by the Western universities, which is democratization of social life through development of critical thinking, imagination, and through cultivation of social and humanistic sensibility. We attempt to diagnose the causes of erosion, the consequences of it and to design a possible future social function of a contemporary university as a counterbalancing agency and a testing ground for civic training. The paper opposes a commonly accepted belief that the university should be changed through the corporate market model and presents theoretical research with references to empirical data gathered by other authors.

**Keywords:** Universities, critical pedagogy, critical management education, learning, instrumental rationality, management

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## Introduction

Reforming modern public universities in Europe reveals contradictions that directly affect their functioning. On the one hand, we have adherents of the corporate model of academia; they claim, generally speaking, that changes resulting from the Bologna Declaration as well as the growth of a mass education create the need for direct management of these organizations towards the market model of a business company. This model of the university, which is dominant in the mainstream and governmental perception of modern academia in Western societies, assumes a search for customers and catering to market needs. It calls for a necessity to compete on the 'accreditation market' and for the ranking lists. On the other hand, there is a growing number of critics who claim that changes in the environment of the university undermine the academic ethos and weaken the cultural mission of the university. They warn that a corporate model will intensify the decay of academia. As academics with a critical perspective at heart, worried about the condition of the modern university, we share this critical vision but we will analyse it in depth.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the connection between market driven reforms and erosion of the cultural mission of the public university. We focus on the following question: how neoliberal reforms affect the cultural mission of the university, which is dependent on the quality of educational processes, traditionally based on the discursive and deliberative communication between teachers and students in the classroom? In the first part of the paper, we show the consequences of reforming academia in a neoliberal market-based way: educational and market fundamentalism, performance panopticism and devaluation of critical reflectivity. In the second part, we put forward proposals for the restoration of the cultural mission of the university through actual experience of knowledge in the classroom.

## Corporate University

The Bologna Declaration has become a key document defining changes in the system of higher education in Europe managed by national ministries of higher education [Bologna Working Group 2005; ENQUA 2009; OECD 2009]. These blueprints for government activities aim at implementing a clearly identified purpose associated with increasing employment opportunities and expected higher mobility of European citizens. Changes should also improve international competitiveness of European universities. Simultaneously, universities are facing a problem with mass access to

higher education connected with an increasing demand of knowledge-intensive organizations for highly qualified staff.

In response to the requirements of the Bologna Strategy and a problem with mass access to higher education connected with an increasing demand of knowledge-intensive organizations for highly qualified staff, universities try to improve imitating the corporate model of a professional organization [McKelvey, Holmen 2009]. The preferred direction in the development of the modern Western university is an entrepreneurial organization, which could function as a well-managed and successful business company. Due to the need for budgetary restrictions of state expenditures on public services, universities turn to self-financing, which means popularization of the tuition-based model. In any case, the dominating trend is simultaneous development of partial or full payment of tuition fees [Teixeira, Johnstone, Rosa & Vossensteyn 2006]. Universities, faced with shrinking state funding, are also forced to seek alternative sources of financing, which Burton Clark calls the “third stream” (in addition to state donations and incomes from education services) [Clark 1998; Clark 2004]. They can be derived from economic activity involving development of intellectual property rights on implementations, collaboration with industry, innovations and generation of new business ventures (e.g. spin-offs) [Johnstone 1998; Teixeira, Jongbloed, Dill & Amaral 2004].

Universities have to become flexible organizations which adapt to the changing market demands and face new challenges while treating all stakeholders as attractive customers. Briefly speaking, the corporate model of the university assumes the following: sensitivity to customer needs, a flexible structure and becoming an efficient organization capable of competing by successfully responding to the changing market demands [Saperstein, Rouach 2002; Gjerding et al. 2006]. It forces universities to abandon the philosophy and principles of the ‘ivory tower’ and transform according to the rules governing a flexible service company which is managed by ‘professional’ managers – those who completed ‘appropriate’ business courses (e.g. MBA) [van Vught 1999; Shattock 2005; Tijssen 2006].

In line with market-driven reforms, management of universities is also undergoing substantial change. First of all, there is a growing number of universities which are not established by the state but founded by private and other non-governmental entities (churches, associations and other entities of the third sector). Besides, corporate and managerial solutions are applied more and more commonly in order to make management of the institution, the process of learning and research more efficient. As a result, the continental participatory model is being replaced by managerial solutions [McKelvey & Holmén 2009].

Enforced growth of effectiveness and efficiency of the university leads to a reduction in the autonomy of both the institution as a whole as well as the scientific and academic staff. Academic autonomy, embedded in the Humboldtian model, served the freedom of research and reduction of interference from authorities, professors' business and other stakeholders in research and academic activity. Contemporarily, manifestations of this autonomy are being gradually eliminated both due to the influence of external factors (government policies, marketization) and internal ones (implementation of incentive and control systems) [Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie & Henkel 2006]. Mechanisms of external accreditation and certification as well as state supervision of universities are being developed. In most countries, the occupation of a professor loses the character of a nomination by the State and becomes merely employment relationship. What are the consequences of the managerial changes?

## **Educational and Market Fundamentalism**

The basic assumptions of a corporate model of the university put it in the iron cage of educational and market fundamentalism [Alvesson 2013]. Educational fundamentalism is concerned with a (false) claim that higher education contributes to the development of the economic growth of societies in a natural way and at all times. According to this ideology, having a university degree increases the probability of getting a job and increasing an individual's self-satisfaction. In this perspective, graduation and getting a diploma guarantee that the holder is an educated person. The fallacy of this reasoning is especially visible if we take into consideration the current trends in the processes of university-level learning. This degrades the processes of education, reduced to a simulacrum, which deepens social frustration [McLaren 2002].

Disappearance of the culture of learning in the corporate model of the university is confirmed by research conducted by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa [2011]. The authors studied 2,200 American college students testing their abilities with respect to critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving skills and competencies in narrative writing. About 45 percent of the surveyed students failed to develop the above-mentioned competencies within the first 2 years of education – and 37 percent failed even after four years. The authors also point to a dramatically decreasing amount of time spent on individual studying and lack of motivation to learn. As far as teachers are concerned, the authors examine the problem of passing an exam by the students who are not involved enough. This dramatic pathology is also more and more visible in Europe [Mazza, Quattrone & Riccaboni 2013; Sugden, Valania & Wilson 2013].

The corporate model of the university is also tainted by market fundamentalism associated with the neo-liberal false belief that markets alone provide an appropriate model for reformation of universities, and act as a competent regulator of changes in the higher education sector [Alvesson 2013]. According to this ideology, the main role of the university is to prepare students for effective functioning on the labour market. This is tantamount to viewing universities as vocational schools while paying no regard to the fact that the market always acts in the short run, whereas the role of the university is to function in the long run and develop students' cultural competences allowing them to design and undertake civil action independent from changes and short-term demands of the markets and societies.

## Performance Indicators: University as a Panopticon

As a next consequence of reformation of universities based on the market model we would like to emphasize the introduction and imitation of new managerial techniques, such as using performance indicators adapted from the *New Public Management* model, aimed at increasing the quality of higher education in a quantitative way [Czarniawska 2015]. The processes of learning and doing research are now measured with instrumental indicators at universities, which allows to compare and evaluate different factors and holds a promise of enhancing transparency, developing quality and creating more efficient organizations. Yet the results have been "naturalization" of accountability, emergence of an audit regime, and performance management that focuses on assessing learning and research outcomes in an instrumental way, favouring quantitative research assessment, standardized knowledge testing and performance-based teaching [Strathern 2000; Craig, Amernic & Tourish 2014].

From our point of view, the rationality of managing performance in the corporate university appears to be similar to that of the panopticon: it orders the whole system while ranking everyone within it [Foucault 1977]. Quality can be guaranteed, it is claimed, through careful monitoring and measurement of performance and productivity: every individual is made acutely aware that their conduct and performance is under constant scrutiny. As Cris Shore and Stephen Roberts put it [1995], far from improving performance and quality in teaching and research, managerial policy has been constructed more in accordance with a political agenda, the aim of which is – as in the panopticon prison – social control of people. The result of this is likely to have devastating consequences for intellectual freedom, education as well as academic identity at universities [Amit 2000].

What is absent from the performance management system is any clear definition of what constitutes 'quality' or 'excellence'. Officially, all institutions can achieve excellence measured against the objectives which they set for themselves. As a result, the system of performance management and audit is seemingly decentralised and institutions and individuals are empowered in the sense that they are invited to define their own yardsticks for excellence [Dakowska 2015]. However, this apparent freedom is counterbalanced by the existence of externally-imposed inspectorates and the publication of results in competitive and hierarchical league tables. Should this prove insufficient to guarantee maximum productivity, sanctions can be mobilised against individuals. These include the policy of linking performance with departmental funding and, beyond that, with individual salaries and promotion prospects.

Academics, like prisoners, are thus caught in a disciplinary system and actively reproduce its negative characteristics while feeling increasingly powerless against it [Tuchmann 2009]. While the theory of management might hold that this produces a beneficial effect (since the employee is goaded into constant self-improvement); in reality, particularly in the context of higher education, this situation might result in fear, destructive internal rivalries and fragmentation of solidarity [Jemielniak & Greenwood 2013]. What is more, instrumental assessment proposed in the market model of the university does not even attempt to measure long-term learning and research implications for the society – but reduces them to mere performance demands of strictly defined outputs [Pettersen 2015]. As Henk Bogt and Robert Scapens pointed out, "there is a danger that the new systems could inhibit creativity in teaching and limit contributions to the world outside the university" [Bogt & Scapens 2012: 451]. Paradoxically, such an instrumental framing of education and research becomes quite convenient for the cynical academics trying to survive in the "academic capitalism", characterized by the hegemony of "publish or perish" norm [Slaughter, Rhoades 2004] and a "Champions League Syndrome" [Collini 2012]. In consequence, as Zygmunt Bauman and Ricardo Mazzeo observe, universities are no longer supposed to educate and undertake research but merely organize the learning and research processes [Bauman, Mazzeo 2012].

## **Devaluation of Critical Thinking in the Management Classroom**

Neoliberal reforms in higher education have resulted in disintegration of the traditional scientific community of researchers and students, which was based on the

master-student relationship and had been characteristic for universities since as long ago as the Middle Ages. The contemporary model of education has lost the aspect of elite teaching, developing a culture-shaping group of intellectuals and moves towards a model of education for professionals with the growing trend of specialization [Sułkowski 2013]. It is visible especially with respect to management education which has been dominated by the positivist paradigm and pathology of non-critical communication in the classroom.

The quality of management education in our meritocratic societies is one of the most important factors which determine the quality of future manager's competences. Management education must facilitate continuous development of critical reflexivity in both students and teachers: the quality of communication between people who are involved in the educational process as well as the value of the content used in this process are crucial for the quality of cultural competence of manager and their level of critical thinking [Grey 2004; Czarniawska & Gagliardi, 2006; Dehler, 2009; Vidaillet & Vignon 2010]. The degree of critical reflexivity in management classroom determines ethical and cultural sensitivity in organizational practice: it is important for managers who are responsible for such important public good as the university to think in a critical way and communicate it clearly to the students and academic staff. Their role is connected with the ability to recognize the normative character and the structural complexity of academia, which is crucial for the development of democratization of the society.

Unfortunately, marketization of universities causes the orientation of the teaching staff characteristic of Humboldtian universities to change – contemporary management education in Western societies is dominated by the technical imperative connected with instrumental rationality [Thomas, Lee, Thomas & Wilson 2014]. The problem is that the transferred knowledge is outdated and based on the positivist and functionalist paradigm [Contu 2009]. More importantly, communication between teachers and students as well as communication with texts is frequently fictional and reduced to storing information in memory [Raelin 2009]. Instead of developing organizational imagination and ethical sensitivity, students merely learn how to calculate profits and losses [Mintzberg 2005; Khurana 2007]. They are preparing to treat other people in the organization as a necessary resource to achieve the most narrowly and technically articulated goals of economic development [Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan & Dolle, 2011].

Using the terminology developed by Bruno Latour, one could say that corporatization of higher education brings down classrooms at universities and business schools to the level of 'black boxes' [Latour 1987] filled with discourses closed to criticism, where interpretations of the reality authoritatively imposed by the teach-

er are reproduced over and over. A similar observation, which seems more pronounced today than ever before, has been made by Russell Ackoff when he analysed the culture-related condition of business schools:

'Most schools are industrialized disseminators of information and knowledge. They have little to do with the generation or spread of understanding and wisdom. They use materials and methods that would be appropriate if students were black boxes whose output hopefully exactly matched what was put into them earlier' [Ackoff 1994, p. 200].

In consequence, we can identify the positivist and functionalist paradigm of formatting knowledge about management, in which the dominant means-ends orientation prevents students, academics and managers of a university as well as politicians engaged in reforming academia from questioning the very validity of specific goals [Zawadzki 2012; Parker 2014]. This is strongly connected with naturalization of instrumental rationality: it is obvious and natural that students study at the university in order to achieve vocational competencies and to become more attractive for employers – so the university has to provide practical courses for them, which are dependent on market demands; it is natural that academics should develop only practical and applied research results, which are highly valued by the market – so the role of the university is to be a mediator between academics and the market. If such a perspective is adopted, more profound ethical and political issues such as distribution of moral responsibility at the university or the relation between academia and the society or culture will either be considered negligible due to the need for implementation of the set objectives or masked through the use of internal instrumental assessments or rankings [Willmott 2003]. In such a case, all efforts to correct organizational deficiencies are reduced to elimination of the elements considered dysfunctional so that the dominant priorities and preference orders can still be retained.

## **Cultural Mission of the University: Proposition of Change**

For the purpose of discussing our proposal for reformation of the modern corporate university, we will first of all consider the following question: what does it mean that the cultural mission of the university is associated with its identity as a counter institution? The cultural mission of the university is defined by Henry Giroux [2010] as an obligation to constantly critically reflect on the socio-cultural environment and intervene in the reality in order to initiate changes to it. According to the philosophy of radical pedagogy, which we have found very important for our reflection upon



academia [Freire 2001; McLaren 2002; Giroux 2010], the university remains a unique place to prepare students both to understand and influence the larger social forces that shape our lives. It is a special fragment of the public sphere, where people should be able to combine hope and moral responsibility with the productivity of knowledge as a part of broader emancipatory discourse. Higher education must be considered a vital component of a mature public sphere (Bloom, 1987). Only then can it offer students the opportunity to involve themselves in the most acute problems of the society and acquire the knowledge, skills and ethical vocabulary necessary for modes of critical dialogue and forms of a broadened civic participation.

It is important to develop a proper educational context for students, so that they can come to terms with their own sense of power and train their public voice as individuals and as potential social agents [Collini 2012]. Universities should assist students-citizens by enabling them to examine and frame critically relevant questions. Students-citizens should be aware that what they learn in the classroom is part of a much broader and fundamental understanding of what it means to live in a global democracy [Nussbaum 2010]. That is why the main element which allows the university a possibility to generate democratic changes in the society is cultural competence; thus it is first and foremost knowledge acquired in a reflexive way by scientists, academics and students.

Students, researchers and academics need to learn how to be responsible for honing and disseminating their own ideas, take intellectual risks, develop a sense of respect for others who are different from them, and think critically in order to shape the conditions that influence the way they participate in a broader democratic culture. In other words, higher education is a moral and political enterprise that must struggle against all forms of dogmatism, commit itself to the most meaningful principles of democracy, exercise a rigorous practice of self-criticism and provide a vision of the future in which students, scientists and academics can function as informed, critical citizens capable of active participating, shaping and governing the world that takes seriously the relationship between education and democracy [Readings 1997].

## Education as Paideia

The ability to think critically, which allows to intervene in the reality, results from the development of cultural competence based on symbolic capital. This kind of capital can only be accumulated as a result of passionate interaction with knowledge. Today, such interactions are disappearing under the influence of the short-term

demands of the societies and markets. Surrender of universities to these demands turns them into closed systems incapable of critical intervention in the reality [Biesta 2013]. The current instrumental pressures – as we have tried to show earlier in this text – relieve the university from its traditional obligation to teach students how to think critically, how to make a connection between self-knowledge and broader social issues, how to take risks, how to develop a sense of social responsibility. Turning its back on public interest, the academy has largely opened its doors to serving private market interests and in doing so has compromised its role as a democratic public sphere [Furedi 2006]. This is very dangerous because the cultural role of the university is strongly linked with the condition of democracy in the society. Democracy cannot work, if citizens are not autonomous, self-reflective, critical and independent — these are qualities which people should acquire at the university, and which are indispensable for citizens and students, if they are going to make vital judgments and choice about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reforms and governmental policies.

From our point of view, introducing both internal (at the university) and external (in the society and culture) changes is connected with acquiring knowledge by students and academics, which is possible through critical dialogue with texts and authorities. Through the reflexive and critical communication people are able to develop cultural competences which are necessary to establish a civic attitude to acting in the society. But the process of critical interpretation in communicative action cannot be structured, if we want it to have a potential to bring about change; people must be autonomous in making interpretations in order to be able to develop communicative and critical skills [Rorty 1989].

Learning by experiencing requires deliberative communication in which different opinions and values face one another, and where care is taken to acknowledge each individual holding some position – by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments and evaluating others, while at the same time making a common effort to articulate values and norms which everyone could agree with [Habermas 1985]. Communication in educational processes must be based on the possibility to constructively use the power of argument. Such a possibility is connected with questioning authorities but also with due respect for them and for all other interlocutors as well. The key seems to be to cause the vision of an authority (teacher, author) as someone who is worth discussing with – but not necessarily imitating – to be embedded in the teaching process.

We have to go back to the true meaning of education as *paideia*: to recreate the true desire for knowledge and true interaction with knowledge, which can empower

the human. Knowledge arises from profoundly salient personal experience with text and a systematic deliberative dialogue with other people – this is what makes up the contents of symbolic culture allowing insight into the complexity of the reality, the development of critical reflection, imagination and a sense of quality. Knowledge facilitates the development of symbolic capital and makes critical intervention in social reality possible. While the level of knowledge capital – and not the position occupied in social structures with their pecking orders – determines one’s elitist status. Preparing people to be the cultural elite and not a social cluster of careerists and philistines – is the main task of the university. The quality of this task determines the level of democratization of the public sphere [Denhardt, Denhardt 2003].

## Conclusions

The changes affecting modern university, which we have tried to describe in this paper, lead to erosion of the academic ethos of science and education and towards the practice-oriented “corporate” activities [Sułkowski 2013]. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of these changes:

**Table 1. Changes in the model of traditional university and academic ethos**

The university in the past	The university in the present	The university in the future
State funding	Diversified sources of financing	Self-financing
Public institution	Public universities dominate, a growing share of private universities	Private universities dominate
Education understood as public good	Education understood as public good and services	Education understood as services
Free-of-charge	Mixed model, some studies are tuition-funded	Studies are paid, fully or partially
The student is perceived as a member of academic community	The student is perceived as a key stakeholder	The student is perceived as a customer, buyer of educational services
Focus on scientific-academic staff	Focus on scientific-academic staff and students	Focus on students and other customers
Autonomy of the institution and scientific-academic staff	Limited autonomy of the institution and scientific-academic staff	Lack of autonomy of the institution and scientific-academic staff (corporate system)

"Professors' democracy" or participatory stakeholders model	Mixed democratic-managerial model	Founder-managerial model of management
Strong interrelation of scientific research and education	Splitting of research and academic paths	Specialization of research and academic activities
Elite model of education	Egalitarian and mass model of education	Common and permanent model of education
Social mission and vision	Social mission with market elements	Market mission and vision
No market, no competition (regional quasi-monopoly)	Market, limited competition	Free market and competition
National and culture-shaping institution	Transnational, culture-shaping institution	Global, profession-developing institution
Academic ethos of science	Erosion of the traditional academic ethos of science	Corporate science
Theory-oriented	Theory and practice oriented	Practice-oriented
Education for intellectuals, orientation at scientific education	Education for professionals, orientation at scientific and professional education	Education for experts, orientation at professional education
Universalist approach	Particularist approach	Pragmatic approach

Source: authors own study.

From our perspective, every social phenomenon should be screened for the possible cultural pathology. From the cultural perspective, the alleged social success associated with the rapid growth in the number of students and graduates of higher education institutions in Western countries is only an apparent success. An increasing number of people holding a diploma does not mean that we have an increasing number of educated people. On the contrary, it appears that today we have more and more certified philistines who did not even begin to breathe the atmosphere of a truly academic environment.

The problem is that such philistine attitudes are socially rewarding. Hence we could say that the most serious cultural deficits are unfortunately the last to be noticed and attract the least attention. While institutions which are responsible for diagnosing the labour and educational market have been announcing great leaps forward for years, the term 'knowledge society' used by them on these occasions, is – in our opinion – a neat rhetorical trick supporting the well-being of the officials, politicians and researchers in their quest for obtaining further funding for their not-too-critical diagnosis and research. Contrary to the statistics being provided, there is less and less real knowledge in our society. We cannot measure knowledge

in terms of the number of students and graduates or against usefulness of the information which guarantees a good degree and a diploma. The ability to use information in practice in the professional field has little to do with true knowledge, cultural capital and solid educational background.

The cultural mission of the university is particularly important today, when critical thought is under assault, in Western, democratic societies as well. If we examine the social environment of universities, we can observe that democracy of critical citizens is being quickly replaced by a swarm of manipulated consumers. Moreover, disengaged and alienated citizens (no critical thinking) provide the cannon fodder for growing cynicism and encourage disinvestment in universities as public goods. Fewer intellectuals seem willing to defend those vital institutions and care for habits of mind that are primary to a substantive, vital democracy, especially the idea of the academy as a public good and an important component of a democratic public sphere.

If higher education is to be an essential sphere for educating citizens equipped to understand others (and with a self-consciousness about the limits of such understanding), to exercise their freedoms in concert with larger concerns over social justice, and to ask questions regarding the basic assumptions that maintain human dignity and govern democratic political life, first of all we have to renew the relationship between learning and the formation of engaged thoughtful citizens. That is why intellectuals must take sides, speak out, and engage in the hard work of debunking consumerism's assault on teaching and learning. They must orient their teaching toward social and cultural change. Teaching and learning constitute a border space that should enable students to confront ethically and politically the connecting tissue of experience and thought, theory and praxis, ideas and public life. Rather than merely confirm what students already know, any viable space of pedagogy must unsettle common sense with the power of sustained theoretical analysis. We have to introduce a kind of critical dialogical education which will be focused on posing and addressing problems rather than giving answers. As Paulo Freire shows [2001] critical dialogue is a crucial part of the process of becoming more fully human, because it allows participants to develop a deeper awareness of themselves as unfinished beings.

The university has to be an elitist institution. But it should not be based on elitism measured by the position in the social structure. The elitism of intellectual merit is based on exclusivity arising from high levels of symbolic capital. These, in turn, allow to achieve a high level of critical reflection. Elitism of this meritocratic type allows to argue for and mobilize resistance to the obvious social dangers that often – as for instance consumerism based on economic rationality – hide undetected cultural pathologies and threaten the sustainability of our societies. The level of democra-

tization of the public sphere in Western societies depends on the quality of liberal elitism of this meritocratic type at the university.

In Giroux's opinion, which we agree with, while higher education is only one side of ongoing social struggles and negotiations, it is one of the primary institutional and political spheres where democracy should be shaped, democratic relations experienced and anti-democratic forms of power identified and critically engaged [Giroux 2010; Nussbaum 2010]. It is also one of the few spheres left, where young people should be able to think critically about the knowledge they gain, and where they get a chance to become familiar with the values that might help them reject the reduction of a citizen's duties to an obligation to go shopping – to consumerism.

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