

# *Transformations of the University?*

## *Some overall Views*

In 1809 the Kultusministerium of the Prussian Government launched what today, at a time when mostly mental laziness forces us not to use any language other than English, we would describe as a “call for proposals”: a public announcement with which all those interested were invited to submit a project for the organization of the new university in Berlin. The echo generated, eleven years earlier, by the publication of the Kantian “Streit der Fakultäten” (“Conflict of the faculties”) was still alive and some of the best minds of the time participated in the public call by the Prussian Government: the eventual winner was the project presented by Wilhelm von Humboldt. One can find echoes of this in Humboldt’s own manuscript published only many years after his death and pertaining to his direct activity as director of the cult and education sector of the Prussian Government: “Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin” (“On the internal and external organisation of the higher academic institutions in Berlin”); from the title itself it is easy to understand how the great intellectual of Potsdam was primarily interested in giving university education the function of a bridge between the dimension of science, understood as the supreme form of knowledge, and the dimension of education and training. A scheme that, à peu près, has still been preserved in today’s Europe, being under all respects a source of pride and a real excellence of the Western training system. Not surprisingly, the “Humboldtian university” is still discussed.

On rereading the Humboldtian project with the disenchanted eyes of today’s world, one certainly cannot fail to be struck by the breadth of perspectives and the ability to interpret the work of university education as a task and at the same time a gift to offer to those who want to access it (“Aufgabe”), as a vocation-profession (“Beruf”) to be cultivated and defended.

There is no trace of “mission”, be it of the first, second or third degree, almost as if the teachers were evangelizers of who knows which inspired Word; if anything, he cares for it, almost every line, for a job well done, with a maniacal quality and precision that brings the university intellectual closer to an artisan of culture (in Humboldtian terms: the “Bildung”) than to the vain and undisputed prophet of some good news (which, in general, is that, *ça va sans dire...*, uttered by himself). There is not even a trace of “business plans” or “fundraising” strategies: times have changed, and we know this. Today, the University is a company and reasons with the rules and standardized procedures of every company (starting with the fact that the works of the creative genius of the researchers who work in it are, and not surprisingly, called “research product, without anyone being in the least disturbed or scandalised by the use of such economic terminology ...).

One can lament this state of affairs and note that we are living in an era of transition and crisis for the University, not only in Italy. Perhaps, however, not an exceptional crisis, if by “exceptional” crisis we mean something new and unprecedented.

In fact, on closer examination, every era has experienced moments of rethinking and uncertainty about the structure and future of the University and the alarmed and desperate voices of the catastrophists have never failed to act as a counterpoint to the joyful triumphal marches of the coryphaei of the “*magnifiche sorti, e progressive*” of the present time ...

Every “crisis” is, etymologically speaking, an opportune moment (a “*kairòs*”) for a review and a judgement on the direction that the cultural movements within a society are taking and therefore on the prospects for development (or withdrawal) of those same movements.

A period of crisis and transition, of rethinking and, in Vichian terms, of “retracing” was certainly 1969, the year in which Pietro Piovani published, in Naples, printed by Guida (reprinted in 2000), a booklet with a title, as effective as it is corrosive: “Death (and transfiguration?) of the University”.

We were in the aftermath of May ’68, an earthquake period (for evil, but also and above all for good) the University, a movement of arousal from the torpor in which it, on account of or conformity, traditionalism and maintenance of ancient privileges and powers, had fallen.

The long crisis of the European University was prompted by a radical social transformation, marked by the disagreement between the elitist model, which had in fact characterized the University of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the mass model, i.e.

the democratisation of the University and its accessibility to a wide audience. In this context, Piovani argued, a new idea or model of higher education cannot start from the University as it presents itself in its current state, much less from most of the current university students: in the first case one would make the mistake of taking up again the nineteenth-century image of the universities as a forge of the ruling classes and in the second case to resort to those who, having lived in decomposition, did everything first to postpone it, then to hide it, not wanting to see the symptoms of their own incapacity persisting and recreating themselves.

The University as known up to now, therefore, argued Piovani, no longer exists, nor will it return. Is it possible, and if so, how, that from such “defungere”, that is, literally, from this failure to function up to that moment performed by academic institutions, they can be reborn “transfigured”, to continue, even if “sub altera specie”, to exercise a role and a function?

A question, which, “mutatis mutandis”, it is legitimate to re-propose today, in a time that is when the society in which we were destined to live has developed, in the wake of the imperative of performance and “instant gratification”, increasingly refined strategies, although not always, and necessarily, effective, for accelerating processes, both in the world of the production of goods and services, and in that of communication and interaction. The resulting effect, especially on educational and training institutions, primarily schools and universities, is that of a progressive transformation from places that, “iuxta eorum naturam” were eminently and knowingly dissipative to average “collection” times, to places where, on the contrary, the verification of learning is required, in compliance with the “market logic”, with the greatest possible urgency and must therefore, for this purpose, be segmented, fragmented and parcelled into distinct sequential and procedural moments distinct (and, according to a presumption as absurd as it is rooted, made absolutely “objective”).

The result of this refinement of strategies, mostly silently accepted and endured, when not magnified under the ambiguous insignia of an unspecified “innovation”, coincides with the unstoppable metamorphosis of training institutions into “enterprises” (to the point that not infrequently, even in official documents, female and male students are gladly honoured with the title of “stakeholders”!) and the equally compelling, dogmatically indisputable and undisputed affirmation of the “ideology of competences”.

Competences are, by their own “self-definition”, “complex objects”, or, in other words, objects with such vague epistemological outlines as to be indefinite or more likely indefinable;

in short, to the deadly question about what competences are in the last resort, the clearest and least ideologically conditioned answer could only swing from a sceptical “ignoramus” to a more peremptory “semper ignorabimus” ...

*If the school and university we attended in the green years of our youth could still be content with summarizing the presumptively complex world of skills in the honoured triad of “reading, writing and arithmetic”, today skills – variously declined also orthogonally (think of the mysterious and somewhat disturbing term: “transversal skills”, a worthy semantic heir of the geometrically impossible “parallel convergences” of yesteryear!) or, to give a tone of distinction, declaimed in English (“soft skills”, or “life skills”, or “non cognitive skills”, etc. etc.) – have increasingly taken the place of “knowledge”.*

*Of course: the question of “competences” (whatever they are) does not deserve to be dismissed too hastily with slogans as easy as they are banal, given that, despite the vagueness of definition it encounters, it still signals a real problem, a concern from which no formative work worthy of the name can think of escaping. Thus, one could almost dare to assert that the dialectic between “skills” and “knowledge” has in itself something of the much better known (and noble) Symmelian dialectic between “objective culture” (or “objective spirit”), that is, the products and achievements of collective culture, and “subjective culture” (or “subjective spirit”), that is, the degree of culture and education of individuals. The dialectic between these two “cultures” is of a tensive and chiasmic nature: while the first grows, the second, in most cases, fails.*

*Now, the subjective culture is the individual soul that develops its inclinations and its own unity, changing into the objective culture and then manifesting and presenting itself in it. This is why, as Simmel himself stated, there can be no subjective culture without an objective culture; which, however, is not designed to improve the cultural level of the individual, since it owes its success rather to the division of labour and the high specialization of technology*

*With the detachment of objective culture from the subjective one, the former becomes a kingdom of foreign and mostly indefinable objects, while the latter loses its content and its possibilities of articulation, becoming thinner and thinner. Since, for example, the piano is technically more complex than the violin, it has, so to speak, a greater life of its own, that is, greater autonomy from the artist. Today musical synthesizers make the presence of an artist almost completely useless and this applies to all spheres of music. The possibilities of electronic*

recording and reproduction of sounds are amazing – the ability to play an instrument or to compose, however, cannot go hand in hand (not to mention the widespread musical culture and the quality of the music mostly listened to, sadly low).

Together with a huge amount of cultural products and together with their technical reproducibility, the possibility of seeing, reading and listening to an innumerable quantity of the most disparate works of art grows rapidly; however, the actual artistic articulation capacity of the individual lags significantly behind, or even disappears.

Analogous examples could be cited in the field of writing and communication: we have, in terms of objective culture, extremely refined editorial packaging tools (today everyone, in the face of a relatively modest apprenticeship from the point of view of fatigue, is able to pack, with a specific programme of one's own pc, a whole book, cover included), however, in general, the quality of writing, in terms of subjective culture, has become increasingly poor; we have, in terms of objective culture, extremely precise and easily accessible communication tools (and the experience of the pandemic lockdown has made us, in these fields, more and more shrewd), however, in general, in terms of subjective culture, their ability to communicate experiences that go just a little further than simple epidermal emotions – stylized in the so-called emoticons – is mostly degraded to levels of affective primitivism.

Of course, even without seeing in all this, as Simmel wanted, the “tragedy of modern culture”, it would still be wrong to ignore the phenomenon: the more varied the culture of a society, the more difficult it becomes for the individual to relate to the necessity of integrating that culture. and affirming it as his/her own. This is a social process, whose effects can also be seen on a daily basis in the evolution of university life and organization.

One effect is, for example, that of the growing drive, within the management dynamics of the University (the so-called “governance”, whatever the meaning attributable to this arcane term, as widespread as it is vague in its polysemy), to “bureaucratisation” and “proceduralisation” of processes (just think of the standards for certifying the quality of teaching or the evaluation of research), which certainly move in the direction of a predominance of “objective” culture over “subjective” culture. The “functionalization” of the teaching profession, that is, its progressive transformation from an intellectual profession to a managerial-organizational profession, is a fairly clear indication of this, now almost undisputed, predominance of “objectivity”.

Therefore, in observing the current reality of the Italian and European universities (and also of the North American ones) with dispassionate eyes and not obscured by disturbing *à la page* conformisms, it would be very difficult to apply Immanuel Kant's wise and literally enlightened words to the situation of the academy: words which he dedicated to the *Kirchengeschichte*, that is to say, the fact that the most favourable period, the *kairòs*, in the history of the Church is, and must always be, for the philosopher of Königsberg, the present moment.

Certainly, Kant could affirm this by virtue of his conviction of the pre-eminence of the invisible, universal and non-denominational Church, therefore intrinsically free and rational, over the visible, historical-concrete and confessionally oriented Church; it may therefore be that the regulatory content is contained in the adjective "unsichtbar" with respect to the constitutive (and dogmatic) use of "sichtbar" is, *latu sensu*, also extensible to the University. That is, that there is an invisible University that, extensively, encompasses the visible University and perfects it with the help of the beneficial and utopian perspective reasons of the "als ob", of regulatory ideas. It is possible.

However, the pressure, which is too strong, exerted by the seductive persuasions of the treacherous protections of the "spirit of the times" (which makes us say, new Don Alfosos, that, on closer inspection, if "others call it a vice and others use it", basically, however, adapting oneself is only a "necessity of the heart", because "they all do it this way!"), in order to be able to really see that the University which, like the city of Plato, "exists only in our speeches"...

Seduced (and, in many cases, soon abandoned) by the sirens coming from a particularly suitable method, both because of cultural, and linguistic-syntactic affinities, with the North American world – and, in any case, with the English-speaking countries –, as well as conditioned by the combination of circumstances (rationally not always understandable, but essentially dictated by needs imposed more by the global market than by thought or, let alone, by syntax) that have led the English language to establish itself in various fields as a vehicular language (if not, even, as the only scientifically accredited and creditable language), the Italian University and, in it, especially the humanistic culture seem to have often lost confidence in themselves and in their ability to qualify, in the peculiarity of their organization, as a lastingly valid proposal to address the decisive issues that always have and still do grip and distress the contemporary individual.

The overall picture does not, however, from a sociological point of view, only consist of shadows, on the contrary. The effects, albeit chiaroscuro, of the Bologna Process are beginning to be felt at least from the side of the increasingly real and factual creation of an authentically European university space (the success of exchange programmes such as Erasmus and the credit system, with the consequent comparability of curricula are obvious examples). The effect that has emerged, and is constantly emerging, is that of a general tendency towards the institutional internationalisation of universities which, in the last thirty years, has undoubtedly become more marked not only on a European scale, but also globally, above all thanks to the development of digital technologies. This appears, on careful examination, something qualitatively different from the international circulation of ideas, which has always occurred, and also from the international collaboration between leading research institutions, which in the twentieth century has several examples: one could perhaps speak of the progressive formation of truly global knowledge, a very dense network in which, each university represents a hub of reception, elaboration and dissemination.

The indicators illustrated in the 24th AlmaLaurea Report on “Profile and Occupational Condition of Female and Male Graduates”, presented in June 2022, also demonstrate this, in a plastic way, with regard to the transformations taking place in the Italian context. The data reveal a substantially positive evaluation of the Italian university, with 88.8% of graduates declaring themselves satisfied with the relationship with teachers and 72.9% confirming the choice made with regard to both the course and the university. The survey of the Employment Status also shows a tendential improvement in the employment rate one year after the qualification, marking +2.9 percentage points compared to 2019 for the second level graduates and +0.4 points for first-level graduates evidently confirm this, with regard to the transformations taking place in Italy. Salaries are also increasing: compared to the 2019 survey, there is + 9.1% for first-level graduates and + 7.7% for second-level graduates.

On the other hand, the labour market portrays a picture of instability for recent graduates with an increase in fixed-term contracts, a mistrust in institutions and, on the contrary, a broad trust in technology, in the network of social relations and in the family, crucial factors for improving graduates’ employment and professional possibilities.

The Report shows that, in any case, graduating represents a competitive advantage. The level of the qualification held is decisive for not remaining unemployed and for earning

more. In 2021, the employment rate of the 20-64 age group among graduates was 79.2% compared to 65.2% of graduates (ISTAT data) and a graduate, according to the OECD (Organization de Coopération et de Développement Économiques), earned 37.0% more in 2020 than a high school graduate.

The Report confirms the paradox of a population of female graduates who graduate earlier, and perform better than their male colleagues, but who encounter greater obstacles in terms of entry and conditions in the labour market; the “gender differential” is greater for the humanities, while it is less significant for the technological-scientific disciplines.

As for enrolments, after the significant decline recorded starting from the 2003/04 academic year, starting from the 2014/15 academic year there has been a steady increase in freshmen, reaching + 21% in 2020/21 compared to 2013/14 (source MUR). However, in the last academic year (2021/22) there has been a drop in enrolments (-3% compared to 2020/21), more marked in the Southern universities (-5%). In any case, the number of students enrolled is still lower today than in 2003/04 (-5%). However, in the last academic year (2021/22) there was a drop in enrolments (-3% compared to 2020/21), more marked in the Southern universities (-5%). The trend of enrolments is reflected in an interesting way in the subject areas: compared to the academic year 2003/04 the STEM area (ie the macro-sectors of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) shows an increase of 14%, while the health and agro-veterinary area recorded an increase of 2%. Finally, the artistic, literary and education area and above all the economic, legal and social areas are still below the 2003/04 share of enrolments (respectively -11% and -15%).

The pandemic has significantly reduced the study experiences abroad recognized by the degree programme, which involved only 8.5% of graduates in 2021, thus returning to levels below those of 2011 (percentage equal to 11.3 % in 2020 and 8.9% in 2011). These are experiences which, in addition to enhancing the students’ personal baggage, allow them to acquire greater language skills. In fact, 90.2% of graduates who have had a recognized study experience abroad declare that they know at least one foreign language written at a level equal to or higher than B2, while this share is 59.3% among those who do not have had this experience.

Curricular internship experiences also suffered a setback after a period of increase. In 2021, 57.1% of graduates completed internships recognized by the degree course. In 2011, this figure was 55.3% and, after a few years of substantial stability, from 2015 there was a steady

growth that lasted until 2019 (bringing this share to 59.9%), which was followed by the contraction in 2020 (-2,3 percentage points compared to 2019) and 2021 (-0.5 points compared to 2020).

*Both experiences abroad and curricular internships increase the chances of finding work. Everything else being equal, those who have completed a curricular internship are 7.6% more likely to be employed a year after their qualification, while those who have completed a recognized period of study abroad have a 15.4% greater probability of finding work.*

*Research, teaching and education are therefore confirmed, in the University, as Karl Jaspers had already written in the 1960s, as inseparably interconnected tasks, moments of a “living totality”, so that one cannot think of one without the other, that is, without the substance of the University decaying or without, at the same time, each task atrophying or taking on hybrid or unsuitable forms. (cf. K. Jaspers, K. Rossmann, Die Idee der Universität für die gegenwärtige Situation, Springer, Berlin-Göttingen-Heidelberg 1961). The growing attention then paid (in the programmes and in the ministerial funding) to the so-called “third mission” of the University – even if the term is, in itself, quite horrendous – had at least the merit of bringing back to the centre of the debate the importance of the “public role” of university knowledge: the University is not and cannot be an ivory tower, an isolated and elitist place, the prerogative of a select and privileged few, but an indispensable centre for the dissemination of culture and a place of a civil growth for the entire community.*

*It is therefore a question of defending the idea of the irreducible autonomy of knowledge, languages and cultures, against any temptation to bring education back to a standardizing “single thought”. The practical example of Rosmini according to which, in order to build the foundations of an encyclopedia of knowledge, it is necessary to pass, creatively and “poetically”, also from the construction of a “new” language or, at least, of an ad hoc language, remains, from this point of view, a model still worth studying and, in greater depth, also and above all in academic centres.*

*It is a matter of recovering and giving new life to the idea, already peculiarly Humboldtian, which sees in the passion for knowledge, understood as a plurality of forms of knowledge, the essential requirement that unites all those who work in the University: a research and teaching unit. free collaboration between teacher and student, a common refusal to accept, passively, predetermined, standardized and homogenised contents.*

(o.b. - f.g.)