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The European and the American University

Lecture at the University of the Balearic Isles, 7 February 2007

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1) Introduction 5 min

- a) It is fashionable today in Europe to debate issues of educational, particularly higher educational reform in reference to America, usually meaning North America or more narrowly the United States. As many in this audience will know, the oldest “American” universities were founded long before there were any Anglophone settlers in the New World: not, as most *gringos* think, in Massachusetts (Harvard), but in the Dominican Republic (Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo, 1538). Many others, such as those of Mexico City and Lima, founded by Dominican teachers in the 1550s and patterned on such Spanish universities as Alcalá and Salamanca, predated Harvard by nearly a century (1551 vs. 1638). Nevertheless, today’s fashion is to look for reform ideas to what many reformers regard as the most exemplary, modern, effective higher education system in the world, that of the United States. Please forgive me if I use the term “America” as shorthand for this country, because I do know better!
- b) First a caveat, to cite two American proverbs: “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”; but “flattery will get you nowhere”. What grew organically in North America may be admired, but it is also widely misunderstood and very difficult to transplant to societies with different structures, traditions and cultures. Even though the concepts “university”, “college”, “seminar”, “laboratory” etc. were transplanted from Europe to America, along with bachelor, master and doctor degrees, they had only vague definitions until almost a century ago. Even now it is not possible to say the word “university” and mean a set of institutions identical in all respects. Let us beware of thinking “educational transfer” is as easy as “technology transfer.”
- c) Let us therefore keep in mind a vast and differentiated landscape of “institutions of higher education” during this hour, with great variations in size, financial means, programs, qualifications, degrees and certifications offered, research dimensions, amount of independence from state, church, community or business interests, academic freedom, relation to learned professions, self-government and – almost incomprehensible to Europeans – commercial sports or corporate sponsorship.
- d) Until as late as the time of my birth and youth, the 1940s, “educational transfer” had been tried mostly in the direction TOWARD the USA. The founders of Harvard and Yale were imitating, in a modest way, the Oxford and Cambridge “colleges” with which they were familiar, and at a time when the training of clergymen in religious and classical literature was their main purpose on both sides of the Atlantic. There would have been even fewer “colleges” in the British-

American colonies were it not for the quarrels and schisms among North American Protestant sects – the usual founders and bearers of such colonial imitations – than a need for professional men. It was then and remained as late as the 1880s difficult even so to tell the difference between a “college” and a “high school”. Later attempts to copy essentially French scientific academies had not worked out well in America, hence the willing adoption of the cheaper and more practical elements of the German “research university” starting in the last third of the 19th century with the upgrading of older universities like Yale (first PhD 1867) and the founding of new ones like Johns Hopkins. Public “universities” were also made possible by the Federal Morrill Acts (1862 and 1890), “granting” public lands and income from them to those states willing to establish and maintain what came to be called later “universities” and polytechnic (or “A&M”) colleges. The timing resulted from the disappearance of opposition to Federal involvement in education by the slave-holding secessionist southern “Confederate” states, which however managed to keep freed black slaves largely out of higher education, and even state colleges were too costly to provide mass access anywhere in America. The lands donated by the Morrill Acts, it should be mentioned, were largely confiscated from Native American tribes placed on reservations. Depriving both black and red Americans thus played a key role in “democratizing” American higher education. Again following the English rather than Continental pattern, much professional higher education remained in private institutions separate from universities (law, medicine, engineering, fine arts, and clergy). Only with the boom in attendance in the 1920s and again after World War II did professional education become largely integrated into universities, a steep hierarchy of funding, prestige and research emerge and ever more disciplines come to be defined there as worthy of “tertiary education”, such as school teaching and nursing.

- e) And a final caveat: let us remember the fact that the American system was still 100 years ago – like the European – VERY SMALL: only 2.5% of all Americans attended “college” in 1890, and given the comparable level in Europe many of these should only be counted as high-school students. The first big growth spurt happened in the 1920s, with the addition also of many more female students (39% of the total already), to equal 12% of the American population.¹ Only recently (in 2003), with half of all American high school graduates attending “college,” was the maximum proportion (27%) of all Americans *finishing* college (bachelor degree) reached.² In addition to being aware of incommensurabilities in SIZE we must also bear in mind differences in QUALITY: comparisons of knowledge between American and leading foreign student bodies consistently show the former posting a poor grade in many fields. One cannot escape the argument that

¹ United States Department of the Interior, Office of Education, “Statistics of Universities, Colleges and Professional Schools, 1927-28,” *Bulletin*, 38 (1929), p. 8. American enrollments nearly doubled between 1920 and 1928. By way of comparison, the percentage of *university* students (i.e. those already past the thirteenth year of schooling and the rigorous qualifying examinations lacking in America) constituted about 0.6% and 1.4% of the German population around 1890 and 1933. Cf. Charles E. McClelland, *State, Society and University in Germany, 1700-1914* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 242 and Germany, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich* (Berlin, 1934), p. 534.

² Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bachelor's_degree.

much time, energy and money is wasted in American “higher education” because it is treated more as a supermarket for social markers than as the holy temple of the nation’s sacred wisdom.

2) Commonalities and differences between the American and European university

- a) One of the most useful contributions historians of education can make to the discussions of European higher educational reform is this: look behind the permanent names and explain the ever-changing *functions* and *relationships* involved. I hasten to add that even the permanence of the term university is debatable if one goes back to the Middle Ages: it was then a reference to the student body, as distinct from the *facultates* that had the authority to award degrees somewhat like guilds had the authority to issue certificates of apprentice, journeyman and master. In an age of “virtual learning” the original *universitas* is perhaps disappearing.
- b) Let us start with licensing, however. That was from the start of the first European universities – or let us say predecessors of today’s universities – in Bologna, Paris, Oxford, or Salamanca – an important reason for existence, backed by the authority of Church (Pope) and State (Emperor or King). But certified for what? From the start also, European universities were strongly tied to ecclesiastical and royal interests, producing primarily civil and church office-holders. As late as 1800 the medical faculties were frankly regarded as a minor place to train a few “strangling angels to bring the moribund to their graves in an orderly way”³ – so useless was “school medicine” in curing disease. For the rest, today’s faculties of arts and sciences, they were long considered merely preparatory “colleges” for the professional faculties, notably to brush up the bad Latin many teenagers spoke. The American “college” – there were no “universities” in today’s sense until the end of the 19th century – can best be compared to the faculty of arts and letters, except not many who attended it bothered with taking any degree, and certainly not higher ones.
- c) Another commonality is *structure*. By the 20th century, American and European universities had widely adapted many elements of what I may call the German model, consisting of qualifying entrance exams, division of teaching and research into faculties with seminars, laboratories and institutes, all (despite some lingering attention to *studium generale*) with the purpose of producing learned professionals in the fields of theology, law, medicine, and the natural, social and cultural sciences. Whether formally integrated in “universities” or equated with them, similar institutions for engineering, architecture, the fine arts, and even the “semi-professions” followed this structural pattern. There were of course many exceptions and deviations, with local traditions, French models or those (e.g. Soviet) derived from them, and unique innovations. I need not go into the incompleteness of moves toward common structures: the current efforts to integrate European as well as US-American higher education still have far to go.
- d) The social settings, purposes and outcomes of university education are significantly different that I will send up warning signs about them later. Yet both American and European universities have become part of a society-wide

“professionalization project”⁴ which has become perhaps the most significant socioeconomic divide in today’s societies.

- e) A common problem for both European and American educational institutions is how to pay for it all. Today a four-year bachelor degree at one of the best American universities can cost a student about \$160,000, an investment that can usually only be recovered after several more years of expensive study at a professional graduate school. The equivalent qualification to be a lawyer, doctor, or university professor might cost as much as a total of nearly a half-million dollars. Scholarships, loans, and grants offset some of these costs for the less wealthy, but they are still staggering. Except for Britain and a few other countries, Europe has mostly followed the route of public financing for universities, but taxpayers and legislators have reached their limit. Serious questions arise about the feasibility and even desirability of “free” higher education for all who think they need it. Without answers to the financial problem, though, both American and European communities may have to sacrifice cherished ideals of democratic participation in the “knowledge society.”

3) What can Europe adopt from American Higher Education? What should it avoid?

At the moment when the United States intervened significantly for the first time in the destinies of Europe and entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson delivered a famous speech suggesting Fourteen Points for the conclusion of an equitable peace. These do not concern us today, but Wilson came to his high office after a career as a professor and later university president (at Princeton), where he experienced both successes and signal failures as a reformer. Historians still argue today that Wilson’s peace plan, had it been followed at the Paris Peace Conference, might have averted the need for World War II. Somewhat more modestly, I would like to suggest today Fourteen Points for European university reformers to keep in mind as they study the American university system. I can say, however, with some relief that, even if they are ignored, no world war will result! [Cf Power Point List III]

- a) What can/may be adopted fruitfully:
- i) Competition:
- (1) It is still widely accepted as the main secret of success leading to the modern “research university”⁵ (Ben-David).
 - (2) Without competition for best students, faculty, universities tend to become school-like, drawing merely on students and teachers from a local area.
 - (3) Universities can also have “college” functions, but today they must remain more than ever centers for the expansion of knowledge. In the EU case, this may come to mean continental competition as in the USA. (American students produced this at first by leaving the USA to study in Europe!)
 - (4) Competition with non-traditional suppliers of advanced training (“virtual” institutions like the University of Phoenix with 100,000 students; or

⁴ Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley, 1977), passim.

⁵ Joseph Ben-David, “Scientific Growth: A Sociological View,” *Minerva* 2 (1964), 455-76.

- corporate in-house training programs as examples) can produce healthy innovations without destroying the essence of universities
- (5) Promotes more academic freedom, vital to research universities

ii) Variety

- (1) The historic weakness of Church, State involvement in higher education led to huge institutional variety.
- (2) Despite waste and fraud in the system, it allows for a niche for all kinds of students and points of view, a basis for a tolerant and functioning democratic society.
- (3) If one can avoid the dark side (see below), especially a strong tendency toward intellectual anarchy and the decay of scientific and scholarly authority, a limited amount of it can be fruitful.

iii) Hierarchy (for sound social/economic purposes)

- (1) The emergence of a “pecking order” or “rankings” arose in the USA only in the period after World War II.
- (2) Subjectivity in making these “rankings” and media manipulation may outweigh benefit to “consumers”; but pretending that all schools are the same is even more misleading.
- (3) If competition works well, it can produce a “quality gap” between the best and the third-best schools that is not crippling. In the USA today, for example, the gap between the Ivy League universities and the good state “research” universities of the American Association of Universities (AAU) or some private small colleges is not as great as insinuated by the former. Nearly 40% of students rich enough to attend any college chose state universities in 1994, up from only 31% in 1980.⁶

iv) Ideal of universal **access** to “higher” education by all who can use it raises important questions.

- (1) Is equal access for all who desire/can benefit from higher education a “fundamental human right” essential to “democratic” societies? In the USA the ideal formulated in the 1960s Civil Rights laws (no DENIAL of higher education – as previously in former Confederate southern states by “Jim Crow” laws and elsewhere by custom based on race, religion, sex, etc.) is still incompletely realized because of widening gaps in wealth.
- (2) Controversies since re: social engineering via higher education (the use and abuse of “affirmative action”, “gender equity” etc.: have produced a

⁶ Duderstadt, p. 124. This refers to students whose family income exceeded \$200,000.

backlash of WAS(P)/M (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants/males) who note that people from wealthy upper-class families like the presidential Bush clan can no longer automatically get their academically mediocre children into Ivy League colleges.

(3) If the “free market” is left to decide, the current trend is retrograde to old times: unequal access based on wealth, connections.

v) Ways to promote VOLUNTARY community/alumni support (and tax reform to encourage that)

(1) Decline of the Central State, rise/rebirth of ideologies promoting decentralization of power (devolution, deregulation, “free” market, and globalization) have led to uncertainty about who is responsible for supporting higher education.

(2) Local initiatives, “boosterism,” private and public contributions (as in USA) are an attractive substitute for *el padre estado*.

(3) Not only private persons and communities but also businesses must accept the role – as the major repositories of wealth in today’s EU and US societies – previously accorded the Church and the State when they were the ones with the most resources. They should also be accorded the tax relief that Church and State also enjoyed for maintaining “cultural” and “welfare” institutions.

b) What is best avoided or examined very skeptically:

(vi) Consumer fraud

(1) The greatest danger of “deregulated” markets is the temptation of some “merchants” to defraud the “customer.” In its most naked form, this means in higher education degrees for money, and only *pro forma* compliance with the “consumer’s” task of learning. (I will have more to say about this inappropriate terminology later.) It offers the *appearance* of education in exchange for *real* resources, and is thus in a way a part of the *cosmetics industry* (worth \$8 billion in the USA for legitimate products like lipstick).

(2) Like many other consumers, students have trouble detecting (until later) that they are being defrauded; and they often collude in their own gulling.

(3) An old form of fraud is “attending w/o learning”, a feature of very expensive and even renowned universities (cf. G. W. Bush at Yale and Harvard Business School). This has become so ingrained in American education that one noted sociologist titled his book about it “How to Succeed in School without Really Learning.”⁷

(4) “Grade inflation” is one result of this pressure to create the illusion of “product compliance.” What does it mean when 91% of a Harvard class graduates with “honors” – *cum laude* or better?⁸ Disrespect and

⁷ David F. Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven, CT., 1997).

⁸ Chronicle of Higher Education, 8 October 2001

“cheapening” of the credential result – a sort of Gresham’s Law of University Degrees⁹.

- (5) At less exalted universities, a similar fraud entails the “feel-good” policies of admitting poorly-prepared students for political rather than pedagogical reasons. The result is often tragic for the students, who cannot handle the work and either fail or become too discouraged and “drop out.” The “non-completion rate” is therefore also a rough index to the gap between the hypocritical claim of “equal access” and the reality of unpreparedness for a “real” university learning experience.
 - (6) Another very old form of fraud lies in other “sanctuaries *from* learning” implied in universities’ reputation for professional-level sports teams, “party school”, etc. Not a few students attend universities fully aware that they will emerge with no meaningful education, but their parents (or the athletic program) will allow them to take courses in basket-weaving or diary-writing. As Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, once said, “A student can *win* twelve letters at a university [that is, be given a symbolic “letter” to sew on his jacket for each athletic team he is qualified for] without learning how to *write* one.”
- (vii) Lax preparation of students
- (1) The “No Child Left Behind” Act is widely regarded by the teaching profession as the latest tacit admission of the failure of the American school system to prepare children properly for university (or much else).
 - (2) As in the EU, a high-school leaving certificate (“diploma”) certified readiness for most forms of work-life and (with correct courses completed) university admission – until 30 years ago.
 - (3) Now “college” – up to five years of full-time university study – is practically the precondition for non-manual labor and propaedeutic for professional careers after further “graduate” education. A Bachelor degree has become a not-always-reliable guarantee of basic literacy and numeracy. It might be said to have the rank of a high-school diploma in 1950.
 - (4) Expensive as it is, university education is no longer *sufficient* to enter certain desirable and creative professions, often those involving what Woodrow Wilson called “the nation’s service”. For these, “internships” that (*de facto*) require a year or two of unpaid in-service training, barriers

⁹ "When there is a legal tender currency, bad money drives good money out of circulation," named for the Tudor-era English finance specialist Sir Thomas Gresham. A more lapidary contemporary statement was recently found as graffiti in one of my university’s restrooms, with an arrow drawn pointing to the dispenser of toilet paper: “UNM degree, take one!”

to entry for children of families unable to support such luxury after college are high. “This is certainly true if one wishes to be involved in altruistic pursuits: say, to join the world of charities, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations), to become a political activist... or to become part of the world of books, or the art world, or an investigative reporter.”¹⁰

- (5) Slipping standards in the EU *Matura* are of course evident, too; but Europe should draw a firm line against admitting unprepared students to higher education.

(viii) The overweening influence of private commercial corporations & military/industrial complex (through funding etc.)

- (1) “He who pays the piper calls the tune”. US universities have *nominally* been *supervised* by boards (“regents”) and/or *led* by charismatic presidents (such as William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago or **Daniel Coit** Gilman of Johns Hopkins), although *professors* have had a strong voice in self-government at the best universities, at least in the twentieth century.
- (2) The EU tradition is of course that of professorial self-government with a powerful counterforce of supervising bureaucracy (in modern times by the State). “Rectoral” not “Presidential” constitutions have been the norm. The European university has done best with strong (but not unchecked) autonomy and self-government counterbalanced by *enlightened* regulation (not always guaranteed).
- (3) US Boards are selected more for political or financial prominence than expertise in education or research. While this can lead to greater community support, lately the trend is for ignorant boards to interfere and try to micromanage the university. Professorial self-government is under relentless attack (as is the institution of the professoriate generally.) Hacks, political favorites and representatives of special interests more and more influence the running of universities, whether private or public. Presidents have become almost revolving-door figures lacking time to “lead” anywhere – they have been demoted to mere fund-raisers and corporate symbols.
- (4) As in the private economic sphere, the trend is to consult short-term benefits to extra-university interests over long-term planning and commitments.
- (5) A major theme among those writing about university developments in the USA is the coming of the “corporaversity,” a handmaiden to the military-industrial-congressional complex,¹¹ global business mega-

¹⁰ David Graeber, “Army of Altruists. On the Alienated Right to Do Good,” *Harper’s Magazine* 314 (2007), No. 1880, p. 38. Graeber, a noted Yale anthropologist, argues that children of less wealthy families can no longer aspire to join what he calls the “intelligentsia”. “Such structures of exclusion had always existed, of course, especially at the top, but in recent decades fences have become fortresses.”

¹¹ President Dwight Eisenhower, who wrote the phrase into his farewell broadcast address to the American people (1961), dropped the reference to Congress in the final version for fear of damaging his party. Cf. Lars Erik-Nelson, “Military-Industrial Man,” *New York Review of Books*, 21 December 2000.

corporations and dubious “foundations” created to espouse ideologies viewed favorably by those interests. Government (especially military) and private entities distort the “pure” research agendas of university basic science by offering money to do practice-focused research that would cost much more if undertaken in their own labs or libraries. Universities, starved for public support, trim their research, curriculum and even professorial appointment policies to suit these interests. Combined with short-sighted student demands, or those of potential later employers of students, university policy is twisted in the direction of these powerful special interests, and “McDonaldization” results.¹²

(ix) Measuring “output”

1. One reason for “prestige rankings” is the uncertainty of “educational outcomes”, a recent obsession of the American higher education industry. Yet there is no valid way to measure “what is learned” in university, beyond how it has traditionally been measured.
2. Cheapening of degrees and grades has resulted in production of an entire minority of graduates from dubious programs or institutions. What is a PhD from Jerry Falwell’s “university” worth? Viz. the personal tragedies in many afterlives of university sports figures, with degrees but no skills.
3. Lack of control over “output” has come to mean that professional associations and their gatekeeping are almost the only barriers to incompetents: bar, medical licensing by state, teacher certification programs, etc.

(x) Prestige rankings as a marketing tool (Hierarchy of prestige based on confusion, snobbism)

1. American culture is deeply enamored of “winners” over “losers,” “success” vs. “failure”. What is true of sports and politics (GWB: “You are either with us or against us!”), business, spills over into “rankings” and a rhetoric of hyperbole designed – like all advertising, another pervasive illness of American culture – to disguise reality.
2. Thus EU should beware of advertising universities for their prizewinning faculty (do the Nobel Prize winners at U Chicago actually teach students?) or other features (is the U of Texas football team really a guarantee of a good education?). Reality of “prestige” is that it fluctuates, and U.S. habit of piling more money on “winners” while 95% of others languish is unsound educational policy. An example of this result is the prediction of one major university president recently (James Duderstadt) that success of major *private* universities in raising money deprives the public sector and “starves”

¹² Dennis Hayes and Robin Wynyard (eds.), *The McDonaldization of higher education* (Westport, CT, 2002).

it. As with toothpaste and automobiles, if “consumers” are to be dazzled with claims of superiority of a “product,” there must be “consumer protection” and objective “product ratings.”

- (xi) Affiliation with spectator sports/entertainment industry
 1. The (mis)allocation of “educational” funding to sports and other entertainments of no direct benefit to pedagogical and research functions of university constitute a perennial scandal in the USA.¹³
 2. Reasons given by universities (and chiefly Class I – including the major research universities) include that sports attract better students (non-athletes) and financial support from community, alumni. The fact that as few as 38% of the student athletes actually get a degree (let alone an education) “justifies” spending hundreds of millions on stadia, coaches who do not teach, and all the corruptions associated with professional, commercial sports.
 3. The confusion between “educational” and “entertainment” mission is symptomatic of a much larger, if more diffuse problem in American academic as well as general culture: the line between “truth” and “entertainment,” between “objective knowledge” and “personal knowledge validated by feeling” is becoming thinner as the process is actively pushed forward by some faculty and administrators, notably for the sake of “identity politics.” [EXAMPLES?]

- (xii) Market myths: students as “customers,” professors as “employees”?
 1. A central myth of the neoliberal “free market model” borrowed by more and more university administrators in the USA is that students are “consumers” and that their tastes, interests, and “needs” must be served. According to “rational choice” theory the consumer knows what he needs and will seek it out. According to experience, however, what most “consumers” wish is not *education* but *certification*, a piece of paper that may open a path to well-paying employment.
 2. By the same token, “professors” become merely interchangeable cogs in a machine to deliver certificates, reduced to low-paid part-time and easily disposable “associates” (to use Wal-Mart language). How such “contingent” employees are expected to justify or pay for years of higher education (including doctoral study) is not explained in these “models”; nor are the consequences of reducing university teaching to the level of serving fast-food burgers – and necessary readiness by

“From 1993 to 2003 Division I schools increased their use of university subsidies from 14 percent to 18 percent and Division II colleges increased their use of subsidies from 61 percent to 70 percent. Between 2001 and 2003, the spending of athletic departments grew three times faster than their university's spending overall.” Tim Lemke, “Brand: Slow down spending,” *The Washington Times*. 31 October 2006.

professionals to change radically and rapidly the “menu” at the whim of fickle teenaged “customers” – discussed,

- (xiii) Diffusion of resources, dismantling of a central physical and emotional “home” (campus)
 1. Because of the huge expanse of the USA, pressure has been and remains strong to make “branch campuses” and “outreach programs” (formerly provided by very small local “colleges”). Local politicians, who can influence allocation of public funds, love such projects. The drawback is that resources are duplicated and spread thin in order to “feed” one of politicians’ traditional “pork barrel” constituencies – contractors and builders.
 2. “Outsourcing” and “distance learning” also tend to eat away at central historical identifying feature of the American university: the *CAMPUS*, a central location where teacher student and collegial relationships can be built and maintained, and where facilities can be shared (libraries, laboratories, classrooms, offices, and socializing facilities). Many campuses are also the main location of community cultural events, such as concerts, plays, art exhibits. While the “campus” is not about to disappear yet, there are reasons to worry that the USA is leading the way in that direction. E.g. “campus-less” University of Phoenix with NO campus but 100,000 “students”.

- (xiv) Increasing distance between teachers and students – the community that has always been the central definition of the “university”.
 1. Dehumanizing of higher education – a trend that will only be accelerated by the IT revolution – may destroy its traditional, European-derived core. The increasing complaints about the lack of a small-group learning experience, one-on-one interactions between teacher and learner, or research “master” and “adept,” in USA points away from the “maternal college” of American colonial experience as well as the “paternal,” German-inspired professional school experience, toward a bloodless and robotic “information transfer.” It reminds us that the ideal of the founders of the modern European research university – the Humboldt brothers in Berlin 200 years ago – advocated humanistic *Bildung* not merely technical *training (Ausbildung)* as the goal of the university. That was a moral and spiritual, not merely an information-transferring process that ought to lead to independent, self-motivated human beings. Such cannot, I would say, be created by machines.

4) Conclusions **10 min**

Recently I visited the Andes Mountains of Peru and came to realize how different the original “potato” was from what is grown today in Europe and Idaho, USA. There is a very old university in Lima and several new ones in Idaho. Today we are thinking about differences between different histories of things called “universities,” which may have even more varieties than potatoes. Just as climate, soil and altitude affect the potato harvest, so – to remind you of Montesquieu’s very old observation – do the environments of different parts of the world effect the “spirit of the laws” and customs.

I have tried today to point out ways in which the American university developed historically to meet somewhat different needs than those found in Europe. Today’s American mega-universities, including the rich research institutions that also educate the elite, have little other than their name in common with the modest colonial colleges, clergy seminars and vocational training schools from which they are descended. Yet they almost all retain some vestiges of their original function, one today discharged in Europe by the secondary school system. Many of the features of “the American university” today that Europeans find attractive or repellent derive from this fundamental difference.

Another fundamental historical difference derives from the absence of a dominant established church and the tradition of strong, usually royal, bureaucratic state intervention in university life. The alternative was initiatives by private interest groups (including many religious sects) and local or regional governments – rarely by the central government – to promote higher education in their own interests. Such traditions have produced welcome diversity in higher education. But they have also left universities naked and vulnerable to social, economic and political pressures. Two examples are worth mentioning. When John Dewey founded the American Association of University Professors in 1915, he did so because it was becoming common for large capitalist corporations to demand that the science of economics be taught only by professors they approved. Although the organization still defends academic freedom today, it properly warns against the same forces resurging. And as recently as the 1950s, during the shameful McCarthy era, professors were widely persecuted and dismissed on suspicion of leftist views. There is no provision in the American constitution protecting academic freedom, beyond the Bill of Rights for all citizens, such as for example the Federal Republic of Germany adopted in 1949 or Spain in its 1978 Constitution (Article 20) or in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Conservative American Federal courts have often rejected appeals to protect it.

Indeed many United States citizens are skeptical that American institutions and experience can be easily adopted abroad. The intellectual tradition of the country has from the start clung to the idea of “exceptionalism.” The more naïve –including, I believe, even a majority of university-educated people – also appear to believe that these experiences and institutions are quite superior to foreign ones. I mention this because it is important to realize that many American descriptions of the “American university” are automatically biased, whether the observers believe they can be adopted by foreigners or not.

Thus I have tried to paint a sober if not negative picture of this “ideal type” to provoke thoughtfulness and caution in discussions about university reform in the EU. One cannot, as alas many European professors and politicians I know do, simply visit Harvard or Berkeley and advocate imitating them, for they are part of a broader and deeper system with a complex history. Their American hosts themselves often contribute

to the distortion. For example, institutions that were only recently teacher-training schools, polytechnics or agricultural and business colleges have had to disguise themselves as “research universities,” partly to attract students and partly to attract state funding. Many experienced observers now predict a “sorting out” that will leave only a few of the more than 2,000 colleges and universities clearly in that category, for example the mere sixty members of the Association of American Universities. Most of the rest may be forced to become, in effect, local computer stations for virtual learning of a very narrow and practical type, serving “customers” of all ages and skill levels. Already for most American students, “higher education” has become both more available and less meaningful since the 1960s. It has become more or less a replacement for a failing secondary school system. Such predictions often entail acceptance of a model of an emerging American society organized around principles of oligopolistic global capitalism, social polarization into economic elites and masses of trained (and retrained) drones, and an anti-intellectual thought-controlled cultural uniformity relieved only by rapidly changing fads and fashions in mass entertainment. The “university” may look more like a shopping mall than a campus, with “niche boutiques” offering specialized and changing wares to fickle paying “customers” and employing easily disposable “shop assistants” to sell the “merchandise”. And even this “mall” may yield to a virtual version, combining Amazon and Google, as it were. Amagoogle? Googlezon? Armagooden?

This projection is a dystopia for most American educators and presumably a horror-image for Europeans. Yet it would be, in one way, the logical progression of long-standing American values. “Knowledge you can use” for example, is the motto of my own university, not “knowledge for its own sake” or “knowledge for the creation of an adult personality.” The pragmatism reflected in this motto can be traced back at least to the founder of the first American institution to call itself a university, Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia. “It is therefore propos'd that they learn those Things that are likely to be most useful and *most ornamental*.”¹⁴ Wit, enterprise, cleverness and inventiveness characterized Franklin and much of the more *secular* colleges that followed, but not deep interest in speculation or “theory.” The idleness of the English Oxbridge gentleman was not welcome, nor was it easy to implant the Humboldt brothers’ idea announced in Berlin in 1810 of *Bildung*, education forming and shaping the best person one could be. The rise of American higher education as an “escalator of social mobility” after World War I may have reflected some of both these ideals, when college students were taken to be social betters and exposed to a bit of humanistic immersion in the manner of the University of Chicago’s “Great Books” curriculum. Part of the “American dream” became the rise from penniless immigrant family to its first member attending university, a process requiring ever fewer generations in the twentieth century.

Today, though, the anxious American parent believes that NOT attending university will mean a downward trip on that escalator, into the ranks of Wal-Mart or McDonald’s employees or worse.¹⁵ With family incomes stagnant or declining, a massive redistribution of wealth that as often as not disconnects academic knowledge from economic success, and ongoing “deprofessionalization,” parents and students incur debt

¹⁴ Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania [*sic*] (Philadelphia, 1749), p. 11.

¹⁵ The difference in 2005 between average incomes of holders of the bachelor’s degree and mere high school graduates was \$23,000 per year.

and purchase only what they can afford, not the highest quality “product.”¹⁶ In a culture that pioneered “economies of scale” there may be no way back for universities that have become dependent on mass education of the cheapest and most efficient type. The “cottage industry” of *simpatico* small colleges may hang on, but it serves only a miniscule fraction of the student public. Thus from the student point of view, and aside from the five dozen AAU members, the “American university” may soon need no campus, libraries, laboratories, or even professors. A few offices for administrators, some with ancient titles, to do the bookkeeping and hand out diplomas for on-line courses and programs may suffice.

While gloomy, this future picture is not inevitable. The changes underway both in America and Europe are driven by social dynamics which may alter course. Not too many decades ago, universities were rather marginal, really not much more than small training schools for the academic professions, involving only one or two percent of the age cohort. In the time of Napoleon there were serious attempts to abolish them altogether as antiquated and irrelevant remnants of the Middle Ages. What 200 years since have shown is how adaptable the institution of university on both sides of the Atlantic is. Optimists can hope it will survive another millennium, too.

Thank you.

¹⁶

Toilet graffiti, with arrow pointing to TP roll: “UNM Degree – Take One!”