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In: Fasora, Lukáš; Hanuš, Jiří. *Myths and traditions of Central European university culture*. First published Brno§§Praha: Masaryk University Press, 2019, pp. 208-221

ISBN 978-80-246-4380-9 (Karolinum. Praha) (paperback); ISBN 978-80-246-4497-4 (Karolinum. Praha) (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/142146>

Access Date: 25. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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THE HISTORY OF UNIVERSITY CULTURE AND SOME CURRENT ISSUES

Through what are termed “myths”, we have attempted to uncover some of the issues for universities which are significant for the (Central) European and especially Czech setting from a historical perspective. In this final, briefer chapter, we will attempt to formulate a number of propositions that stem from our historical knowledge but can actually be viewed as contemporary problems. In doing so, we have made use of publications about the “idea of universities” that have been brought out in Czech and the discussions that have been held for almost three decades in Czech academic circles as well as a survey which we organized among selected colleagues – academics from this country and abroad.

There can be no doubt that the aim of historical research in the field of university culture is to point out continuity and discontinuity in the development of universities, from their medieval beginnings to the present. However, a statement of this kind is not enough to satisfy the historian, who must go on to ask: What exactly does this “continuity” and “discontinuity” consist of? Do we have an adequate understanding of the terms used for university education and research, for example, in the Middle Ages, or even in the nineteenth century? Didn’t the modern period and the 20th century witness changes that completely altered the purpose and role of universities and individual faculties as well as public expectations? Didn’t mass culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, followed by the “massification” of higher education in the second half of the 20th century, change the objectives a university should fulfil in society? But we needn’t confine ourselves to the ideological plane. Didn’t the “players” in all this – university professors, senior lecturers, other staff and finally students – fundamentally change too? Didn’t influences from economics and politics penetrate universities to such an extent that they transformed their internal structure? And aren’t present-day

reflections about universities, their ideals and needs, their struggle for autonomy and independence, their efforts to be competitive, their search for criteria to evaluate performance and their internal instability actually an expression of the deep crisis the entire university world finds itself in? Are we not then left with mere “myths” which help us to depict the university world of yesteryear but whose present-day form we do not yet have precise words for?

This was accurately described in relation to a specific area by the biologist and philosopher Stanislav Komárek: *“Since the Renaissance...anyone who is unfamiliar with Plato’s Dialogues, Virgil’s poetry and Livy’s chronicles and cannot imitate their style with aplomb is not an educated person... After the Cartesian Revolution and especially with the advent of science and technology in practice, it was repeatedly pointed out that classical texts and culture basically represented an encumbrance... Since the 1920s there has been an increasingly vague notion in Europe about what an educated person should actually know. Which languages should he speak? Or is English enough? Should an educated person be able to name all the lanthanoids? Should he know what photosynthetic phosphorylation is? Should he be familiar with the history of France? And Madagascar? Should he know what a Lombard loan is? Who wrote Crime and Punishment? The constant talk about how the system of teaching should be improved and how it is necessary to “promote education” hopelessly confuses two quite disparate things: namely, the training of specialists in various areas of science and technology (...) and the relics of ideas about education in the original sense of the word, understood as care of the soul or knowledge “just” for the sake of knowledge.”*⁴⁹⁵

We could sidestep these and similar questions by saying that it is not for historians to engage in this kind of “philosophizing” – and to some extent we would probably be right. On the other hand, we have written this publication as “interested observers”, as active members of the university community who are expressing their views on current issues and have certain ideas about what universities were like in the past, but also what they should and could be like in the near future. We would therefore like to cautiously express our views on the present as well.

Argument One: The “idea of the university” shows up best when it is missing or distorted

It would be possible to compile a hefty anthology containing writings by many thinkers about what a university really “is” and what the ideal or “idea” of the university is.⁴⁹⁶ It would undoubtedly make for engaging reading to while away many

495 Komárek, Stanislav: *Sloupoví aneb Postila*. Prague 2008, pp. 250–251.

496 In Czech, for example, the subset: Jirsa, Jakub (ed.): *Idea university*. Prague 2015.

evenings. We believe that the most stimulating texts in this imaginary anthology would be those by authors who reflected on colleges and universities at times of their deepest decline or when they ceased to exist. We could cite numerous examples from the early modern period, but let us remain with the twentieth century. This period was – unfortunately – rich in times when the “idea of the university” was heavily distorted or seemed to have completely vanished in some countries. The Second World War was a cruel experience for Central Europe, since in some countries universities were subjected to Nazi ideology and in some countries (e.g. Czechoslovakia) most higher-education institutions were closed as part of Nazi policy. During the communist era, the universities were again subjected to a regime which, declaring class war, limited or abolished some basic university principles – for example, the international exchange of people and ideas. It seems to us that these experiences best illustrate how lively and necessary “ideas” of the university are in cultural settings. During the Second World War, there were students who looked forward to being back at university and teachers who were continually preparing to resume lecturing. In the Stalinist period, it was not exceptional for covert “university” teaching – whose standard was often surprisingly high although it lacked some of the parameters of university communication – to take place in jails and concentration camps.⁴⁹⁷ There are Czech as well as Hungarian and Romanian examples of various covert or semi-secret forms of university education from the 1980s intended to make up for the deficiencies of official universities at that time.

This is not to say that the “ideas” of the university cannot be considered – and considered very profoundly – under normal, democratic conditions. An “extreme” example might be the postwar activity of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, described in the book *The Modern University: Ideal and Reality*.⁴⁹⁸ Jaspers’ writings are clearly shaped by the crisis German higher education had undergone since 1933 and the failings of some university staff, often outstanding scientists. In the renewed Germany, universities were once again to form the basis of science without ideological influence, the “Humboldtian ideal” of research and teaching was dusted off again, and the relationship between science and “humanitas” was reconsidered in the light of the terrible experience of the loss of humanity. However melodramatic it might sound today, at that time Jaspers again dared to speak of “openness to the truth”, human dignity, “mustering all forces” and the “ethos of knowledge”. Nowadays these words might have a note of melodrama to them, but it is necessary to ask dispassionately whether certain experiences from

497 Cf. Vacková, Růžena: *Vězeňské přednášky*. Prague 1999.

498 Univerzita jako republika učenců: Karl Jaspers. In: Chotaš, Jiří – Prázný, Aleš – Hejduk, Tomáš et al.: *Moderní univerzita. Ideál a realita*. Prague 2015, pp. 197–244.

the past might not help us to consider which elements (of university education and culture) are truly essential and which are not.

So in terms of our first argument, based on our (Central European and especially Czech) experience, we could say that the ideal of the university still consists of a) free access to ideas and the possibility of discussing them on the basis of certain rules, b) respect for the reality we are faced with, c) acceptance of a certain type of “scientific” and human authority and a certain type of mutual communication and sharing, d) the possibility of disseminating ideas and information and continuously exchanging them regardless of national borders, e) equal study opportunities and the building of an (inevitably imperfect) institutional foundation.

Argument Two: It is necessary to listen to criticism

Books by Konrad Paul Liessmann, the Austrian philosopher already mentioned in the main body of this book, tend to be eagerly awaited in the Central European intellectual milieu, especially since his “academic bestseller” *The Theory of Miseducation: The Mistakes of the Knowledge Society*, a Czech translation of which was published in 2008, two years after the German original.⁴⁹⁹ As a loose sequel to this book was also released on the Czech market under the title *The Hour of the Ghosts: The Practice of Miseducation – A Polemic*,⁵⁰⁰ it is worth outlining the author’s basic arguments from the first volume. First and foremost, it is a critique of the contemporary higher-education and academic system, which bears the name “knowledge society” but exhibits a whole range of structural problems which result in education gradually being replaced by half-education or even non-education. There are several reasons for this. The most important are not so much the methods of measuring and weighting scientific results or advancing bureaucratization, but rather the general transfer of humanities disciplines onto an economic ideological basis, which manifests itself in the measuring of education (half-education) by means of questions such as “Where are we in the rankings?” and the revolutionary introduction of the so-called Bologna system, which upset the status quo and introduced a system of never-ending reforms. Liessmann’s arguments were compelling, his claims of a Counter-Enlightenment approach within elite education original and accurate. The author did not conceal his conservative conception of education in the humanities as opposed to the natural sciences and was not afraid to expand his topic to take in the whole of society. He did so in a confident tone revealing a detached intellectual view. The persuasive and humorous examples –

499 Liessmann, Konrad Paul: *Teorie nevzdělanosti. Omyly společnosti vědění*. Prague 2008.

500 Liessmann, Konrad Paul: *Hodina duchů. Praxe nevzdělanosti. Polemický spis*. Prague 2015. Cf. review by Hanuš, Jiří: *Kdyby se raději rakouský filozof myšlil*. Kontexty 8 (1/2016), pp. 93–96.

for example, about Immanuel Kant, who would scarcely have made it through the current system – are worthy of inclusion in anthologies. Of course, the fact that there was so much discussion about the publication in Central Europe was not only due to its style: it could be said that it was more the author’s courage, since he came forward with a critique of newly introduced reforms which European political and academic elites were convinced would bring about the desired progress.

It cannot be said that *The Practice of Miseducation* alias *The Hour of the Ghosts* came up with any radically new arguments – instead, Liessmann expands on what he wrote in the *Theory*. Apart from the old criticism of the Bologna reform and various ways of measuring knowledge (PISA), we also find new phenomena which the author treats with scepticism and irony. Firstly, the so-called education expert – apparently, in Austria this is usually the retired president of the provincial school board, who is now using journalism to catch up on what he missed. The education expert is primarily a disseminator of a rehashed Rousseauistic faith, i.e. the belief that young children are wonderful, broadly competent and multi-talented beings who are only corrupted, broken and destroyed by an antiquated education system and a flawed society; a missionary for the belief in brilliant inclusive teaching which aims to level out all differences within one school; and a promotor of a verdant “tree of life” instead of grey classroom practice. According to the expert, the teacher is a coach, partner and friend, and the pupil or student essentially learns by himself. Liessmann’s view of such an expert and his mission is unequivocally negative: the overemphasis on “life”, “experience”, “autonomy” and “competence” eliminates the very principle of all culture according to which subsequent generations build on the achievements and knowledge of the previous generations: “Giving young people enough time to reinvent the wheel may sound good, but in reality we will only be robbing them of valuable time.” What Liessmann considers the second educational folly of the present is the undue emphasis on so-called competences, which in his view have replaced traditional knowledge, learning and curiosity. The third outcome of the new conception of education is the “new undisciplinarity”, which the author understands to mean the disintegration and effective elimination of subjects, fields and disciplines, from primary school right up to university. Here there is a paradox: on the one hand, there is a tendency for traditional fields of study to disappear; on the other hand, there are calls for interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, which are impossible without a thorough knowledge of one basic field.

The Czech academic debate about Liessmann harked back to the tradition of this “genre”, especially the neo-Marxist criticism of half-education penned by Theodor W. Adorno in the late 1950s. Although it is possible to agree with Michael Hauser that Adorno has some similar themes to Liessmann⁵⁰¹, the contemporary

501 Cf. Hauser, Michael: *Věk instrumentální racionality. Moderní univerzita*, c. d., pp. 245–263.

Austrian author is less burdened by a Marxist/sociological class conception and relatively complex terminology, and his analyses are decidedly more “practical”, despite also being written by a philosopher. But it is worth recalling that some Czech authors such as Václav Havel also addressed “half-education” in the mid-1960s in an attempt to catch up with (popular) Western European social themes. Havel’s *Notes on Half-Education*, published in the Prague magazine *Tvář* in 1964⁵⁰², became a very widely discussed text which the author returned to post-1989.

Although Liessmann’s books on non-/half-/education could be assigned to the genre of conservative defences, which have been a part of Central European culture since Baroque times, this is not just about a radical attitude or a sentimental preoccupation with the past. This is clearly demonstrated by the author: because of all the possible criticisms of his opinions, each chapter of *The Practice of Miseducation* includes a very judicious and responsible suggestion for a way out of the crisis. The publication concludes with a pleasing vision of a university or any kind of school that will restore its original mission, become an “island” for encountering and getting to grips with science, create a counterbalance to the volatile virtual world and the “dictatorship of diligence” and once again become a “place of theory” where students will experience the inner and outer discipline of science. This kind of university would supposedly reawaken curiosity and a desire for education and become a hotbed for the intellectual exchange of views – it would cease to slavishly serve bureaucratic and economic interests. One weak point in his otherwise considered analysis might be an underestimation of the market and the alternatives that it presents and creates. In addition to its unquestionably negative effects, the market – especially the laws of supply and demand – may ultimately create a need for alternative models in education which will stand in opposition to both Rousseauistic ideals taken to the extreme and rampant bureaucratization and other strongly negative effects.

Although we can speak of weaknesses in Liessmann’s approach (and that of other conservative critics of the current state of affairs) and its limited applicability to the humanities, our next argument is this: let us listen to critics! Some of them are too intelligent for us to dismiss their words with reference to the “automatic progress” which the conservative naysayers object to.

502 Havel, Václav: *Poznámky o polovzdělanosti*. *Tvář* no. 9–10/1964, December 1964, pp. 23–29.

Argument Three: The “Humboldtian ideal” versus the “national interest”

In this work we have frequently used the expression “Humboldtian myth”, which we have understood to mean one of the main trends in modern university education which began during the general restoration of the Prussian state at the time of the Napoleonic Wars and was manifested, among other things, in the founding of Berlin University. Although this was originally a Prussian model, it became widespread across the whole of Europe and some elements of it even spread outside Europe. In Central Europe it was still alive in the first half of the 20th century, although some serious shortcomings had already become apparent. It was a system of linking science and teaching which is, of course, still applied and applicable today, although a “harmonious” and optimal version of it is sought. Another rather more problematic aspect was that it was extremely liberal, as is shown by the biographies of many prominent 19th-century Europeans. This is clearly illustrated, for example, by the university courses the young Karel Marx undertook.⁵⁰³ This system of courses was essentially about a graduate, after several years of selected lectures (and perhaps also private tutoring and parental support), being able to show the results of his work in the form of a book. In short, anyone who wrote a book had it made. The Humboldtian model was also liberal in the sense that it did not really address the graduate’s job or profession, partly because in comparison with today there were fewer students at universities.⁵⁰⁴

Apart from this model, however, the “ambivalence of modernity” also manifested itself in another way: in connection with the development of the state and its growing needs. This trend seems to have begun as early as the mid-18th century as part of “state absolutism” (consider Joseph II and his reforming interventions in all areas of state administration) and by the mid-19th century it appeared as a strong trend within the expansion of state bureaucracy and the growing power of the state in almost all European countries. In short, the state developed a need for educated people (in simplified terms, “civil servants”) in various positions. The system therefore proved to be different from the “liberal” and “elitist” Humboldtian system, although originally it was also mainly associated with developments in the German lands and Austria. It was based on a particular choice of “profession” or “job” which the “courses” and the form of studies also began to be tailored to. This system increasingly gained ground as the demand for higher education rose, and it was accentuated and refined by twentieth-century political regimes that placed importance on monitoring their citizens and

503 Cf. Wheen, Francis: *Marx*. Prague 2002.

504 Cf. Schlerath, Bernfried: (Hg.): *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Vortragszyklus zum 150. Todestag*. Berlin – New York 1986.

incorporating them into the civil service in an organized way. Some Europeans may still remember the communist “placements” used by the state to determine which region a graduate would work in and which post they would take up.

It could be said with some simplification that current developments in higher education are also playing out on this “board”, albeit in a more sophisticated form. The liberal tradition is by no means dead – on the contrary, it has taken in new influences from abroad, especially from the USA. The rescue of the Humboldtian model is now being carried out on many levels, with experiments into a looser system of Bachelor’s degrees that offers a broader and “freer” foundation for truly scientific Master’s degrees. Another aspect intended to increase the liberality of universities is the emphasis on international exchange and interdisciplinarity. Take, for example, the basic Czech higher-education document entitled *A Framework for the Development of Higher Education up to 2020*⁵⁰⁵ – although it begins by talking about the labour market and the relationship between higher education and practice (as well as social and gender aspects that are considered important by the current EU elites), it immediately goes on to mention measures to promote the quality of teaching and scientific research, as well as internationalization and other “innovations” and “creative” processes. Despite the focus on the future of graduates, therefore, the document also provides scope for the liberal Humboldtian tradition, albeit supplemented by other elements perceived as up-to-date.

It is our belief that this tradition, however much it is referred to and occasionally applied with varying degrees of success, has relatively powerful “counter-blocs” – not only in strong pressure from the state, as was the case in the past (although even today this cannot be overlooked), but in a whole range of problems associated with the rise in student numbers, the rise in the number of universities, the search for criteria to assess the results of teaching and scientific output, and establishing criteria for the appropriate financial evaluation of the work of universities and especially their staff.

Argument Four: Specific problems of Czech higher education

Within this argument we would like to deal with some challenging trends that have appeared within Czech higher education since 1989, though in the belief that they also affect many Central European countries, especially those which underwent the transformation from a communist to democratic regime in the early 1990s.

Firstly, there is the trend of a rise in the number of university students since 1990. The awareness of new-found freedom opened the “floodgates” with regard to the possibility for personal development, the idea of student life with its social

505 http://www.vzdelavani2020.cz/images_obsah/dokumenty/ramec_vs.pdf, downloaded 30. 7. 2018.

opportunities and opportunities for studying abroad, but above all the creation and expansion of state-run and private higher-education institutes. In the 1990s “new foundations” came about in some larger towns and cities with a rather naïve notion of the need for competition and the necessity of supporting some regions through the local school structure. This liberal vision was not entirely misguided, but over time it became apparent that the new universities generally lowered the required higher-education level, despite the fact that some of them aspired to “universal status” without achieving it – it was more a case of specific higher-education institutes reacting to specific regional demand. The creation and development of these institutions burdened the entire system with a “hunt” for accreditation and higher-education specialists, who were in short supply following the communist period. Above all, however, there was a rise in the number of students, and since the early 1990s this number has continued to increase steadily. The sociologist Libor Prudký speaks of the transition from an elite to mass form of education, observing that the process that occurred in the Czech Republic and some other Central European countries took a hundred years in the USA.⁵⁰⁶

The same author describes the growth in student numbers and the creation of schools as parallel processes. In the Czech Republic, public education dominates as a result of historical determinants, but private higher-education institutions have also been created, although they have somewhat different goals and “parameters” – in the Czech Republic, for example, private schools have the opposite ratio of students in full-time and distance learning and a rather different relationship to practical training.

The second most significant aspect of the changes – a long-term one – is the transformation of forms of study, subject preferences and especially the creation of structured courses of the Bologna type. This structural change has been taking place in the Czech Republic since 2001 and from the outset it has had to contend with some difficulties – the Bachelor’s degree did not automatically become the basic and most widespread level of study as a large number of students attribute more importance to a Master’s degree (partly because by law it is not possible to practise some relatively common types of profession, such as teaching, after only completing a Bachelor’s degree.) There have also proved to be significant differences between universities and faculties: some placed importance on experimenting with a “liberal type of study” in the manner of Fareed Zakaria (see *The Myth of Indisputable Foundations*) while others did not. This is also linked to the issue of graduates. According to data from 2013, public universities accounted for more than eighty per cent of the total number of graduates, and it is interesting to note that in the Czech Republic it is economics subjects which have the largest

506 Prudký, Libor: *Rozvoj osobnosti vysokoškoláků jako součást kvality výuky. Témata a otázky k pojetí vysokoškolského studia jako učení se svobodě*. Brno 2014, p. 53.

share of graduates, followed by technical subjects, with the humanities in third place. One aspect perceived as a deficiency in professional circles is the fact that graduates in teaching subjects come right at the “tail end” of this scale.

For historians specializing in culture and social history, it is also very interesting to observe how social attitudes to the university have transformed with the process of massification, how the social composition of students has changed, and also the changes in the status of teachers, degrees and social rituals. For example, it is worth mentioning the very widespread belief that in a number of fields Bachelor's courses have transformed into a higher form of secondary education, with graduates often achieving the level previously reached by school-leavers. This trend corresponds to personality development, as pointed out by contemporary psychologists – students and young people do not appear to “rush” into adulthood, and some authors speak of adulthood being as late as around 24 years of age. With a few exceptions, this developmental process is not taken very seriously in Czech academic circles.

This is also related to everything that could be termed “student issues”. This includes the transformation of the clear vocational focus that was still being employed in Central Europe thirty years ago into a much looser type of study which in practice is often a search for an appropriate form of study even several semesters after it has begun; the change in the chances of securing permanent employment after graduating in particular subject areas (in the scientific sphere, employment is increasingly on a part-time, temporary basis for the duration of a grant, with the insecurity that entails); the pressure to acquire experience abroad, which is associated with the need for language skills; the demands on Bachelor's and Master's theses, which is related to the Bologna system, and so on.

We also believe that, owing to the history of Central European universities, there is still a major shortfall in responsible collaboration between individual fields of study (and hence also faculties and institutes). On the one hand, declarations of interdisciplinarity appear in almost every scientific project; on the other hand, this interdisciplinarity is often superficial – that is, if it does not just remain on paper. Of all people, scientists should know how difficult true disciplinarity is and how exceptional it really is.⁵⁰⁷

507 Here it is possible to cite an example from the history of historiography. The most famous French historical school of the 20th century, *Annales*, arose as a programmatically interdisciplinary school, which was partly a result of the strong personal links between the individual protagonists, the consistent programmatic opposition to the existing historiographical school of thought and the general social demand. Cf. Burke, Peter: *Francouzská revoluce v dějepísectví. Škola Annales 1929–1989*. Prague 2004.

Argument Five: Money “only” comes first

A major and recurring theme in Czech higher education is funding – or rather the lack of it. There is talk of the “underfunding” of education, but this has to be seen in a wider context. Underfunding is a structural problem related to the trend resisting tuition fees within public higher education, to the system of subsidies and grants from Czech and European sources which are intended predominantly for specialist purposes, the minimal involvement of private firms and wealthy entrepreneurs in education, and poor financial management in some schools. However, “underfunding” is a word that keeps cropping up in surveys into problems in education, in regular complaints by academics from various fields and especially among younger teachers who have not yet reached the higher career grades which also entail higher financial remuneration.

One specific and significant aspect of the whole matter is the method of assessing the results of university lecturers’/researchers’ work, or rather the lengthy search for an optimal form. Comparative analysis – for example, the most prestigious and best-known world rankings, U21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems, which compares the quality of higher-education systems in fifty countries around the world – has shown that in 2017, following three years of slight improvement (in 2016 it went up by one place and in 2015 by three places), the Czech Republic dropped two places in the overall assessment from one year to the next and was ranked 24th. The Czech Republic achieved the historically lowest score in the area of connectivity (concerning international cooperation and open access to information) and environment (government policy and regulation, proportion of women, standard of the education system as a whole). The Czech Republic comes off worst in the area of output (which assesses the position of a country’s universities in the international rankings, the numbers of scientific articles and citations of them, graduates and their employability on the labour market).⁵⁰⁸ This ranking points to weaknesses in some universities when it comes to striking a balance between teaching and scientific research. However, these results do not mean that all universities and colleges are badly off financially, only that there is one basic structural deficiency.

In the chapter on “academic capitalism” we outline numerous problems of history and, in part, of the present too. At this juncture we would also like to mention the inconsistent reception of European projects aimed at increasing the competitiveness of individual fields, improving teaching through innovation and assisting schools financially in the search for new (alternative, more creative) methods of teaching and education. It is no secret that these projects

508 <https://www.universitas.cz/ze-sveta/85-ceske-vysoke-skolstvi-si-v-porovnani-s-padesatkou-zemi-pohorsilo>, retrieved 1.8.2018.

are often viewed with ambivalence – on the one hand, they certainly improve some parameters of teaching, but on the other hand they burden schools with cumbersome bureaucracy, pull apart workplaces set up in the customary way, change their orientation and are sometimes ideologically tinged. The problem of subsidizing through various grants, including European ones, is also related to the widespread vice of “obtaining money at any cost”, i.e. circumventing the donor’s intentions. In this context there is talk of “wasting” money as well as “underfunding”. At first this seems to be a paradox, but in reality it is probably one of the serious problems no-one has really addressed in the Czech Republic.

The funding of schools is directly related to university lecturers’ self-esteem, a value that has recently started to be discussed in the Czech Republic – mostly in a wider context that also incorporates the self-esteem of teachers at secondary and primary schools. Generally speaking, it has been shown that an improvement in the relationship in this area cannot come about without establishing clear rules (a high-quality career structure, methodology for assessing teaching and research) and simplifying the entire system (“de-bureaucratizing” projects, etc.). The question of properly funding schools is also largely a political one, and in a system where most of the funding is provided to universities and private schools from the state budget it is dependent on the overall strategic government concept – how the government and the current political elites prioritize the value of education for the country’s future. One very obvious problem specific to the Czech Republic remains the all-too-frequent changes in government and ministerial officials, which is largely counterproductive in education. Another factor is political decisions which – unfortunately – often fail to correspond to the condition and possibilities of the Czech economy, especially in the area of so-called basic research and the possibilities of applying science and research in practice.

Argument Six: The need for debate about university culture

As part of the various reforms related to the transition from an elite to mass (universal) type of education, one problem which continually crops up is the relationship between the competences of the state and the universities themselves, with existing problems often being swept under the carpet. This is not only about what the state (through its institutions) and elected university bodies should “do” – determining competences is of the utmost importance, as can now be seen in the changes to the accreditation system – but also about the fact that there is no institutionalized discipline (or course) within universities to deal with university culture in its historical and present-day dimension. Although there is specific expertise at individual universities investigating some aspects of the history and present of university culture, systematic research has not been carried out. The

historical aspect is usually covered by a “positivistic” description of particular institutions combined with a current need to raise the profile of universities as part of anniversary celebrations, while the present situation is usually examined within traditional disciplines (philosophy, sociology, psychology) or individual theses based on individual study preferences. That is why a number of vital questions remain unasked. A typical example of such a question is the relationship between key groups of subjects (humanities, natural sciences, medical science, technical subjects, new subjects and courses), various facets of which are “tackled” only at an ideological level (European projects) or an entirely practical one (for example, specific relationships between faculties of the same university when the budget for the following year is being set; research carried out by non-university facilities). And yet the relationship between groups of subjects is one of the most traditional and at the same time most current: there is a link between the view of subjects, their identity and self-esteem, society-wide and political support, the perception of access to tertiary education, and student “careers”.⁵⁰⁹ As part of the transition from elite to mass and universal education, the fundamental problems of “subjects” and their role have been reinstated.

It is true of the Czech setting that in contemporary history these fundamental questions have remained the domain of individuals who (for political or other reasons) have often remained outside universities. For example, thinkers like Jan Patočka (1907–1977), Josef Šafařík (1907–1992), Božena Komárková (1903–1997) and Zdeněk Neubauer (1942–2016) have considered technical developments and the relationship between the humanities and natural sciences (ecology).

In this regard, countries which have undergone the transformation from communism to democracy have one more problematic legacy which they are sometimes at a loss to deal with. In some fields of research, universities have competition from the Academy of Sciences, which carries out basic research as some university departments do. Over the past thirty years this relationship has gone through many twists and turns as the “fields of competence” have been defined, with science and university teaching converging in many subjects (most commonly, some experts from the Czech Academy of Sciences work part-time at universities while some teachers are involved in academy projects). This systemic shift is also directly related to subject identity and scientific and non-scientific interests. Even this specific area requires a continual search for the optimal situation, as is the case in many other areas.

In short, within university culture there are important themes which by their nature lie “outside” the standard and newer disciplines but still require a systemic approach.

509 Czech debate on the changes in Czech higher education from elite forms to universal ones, cf. Prudký, Libor – Pabian, Petr – Šíma, Karel: *České vysoké školství. Na cestě od elitního k univerzálnímu vzdělávání 1989–2009*. Prague 2010. Here the authors mainly work with the conception of the American author Martin Trow from the 1970s.

Argument Seven: The wider context of the debate

The wider context of the debate we are instigating consists of several different aspects.

The first aspect is the transformation of higher education and academic education which occurred post-1989 in the countries of the so-called “Eastern Bloc”. This makes it possible to compare reforms in various Central European countries which had to fundamentally change their educational priorities and overhaul the entire system in all its constituent parts. It could be provisionally stated that most young people in the Czech Republic managed to adapt quickly to these fundamental changes and adopt most of the basic measures of transformation (eliminating centralism, increasing the range of courses and subjects available, opening up possibilities for studying abroad, increasing the network of schools in regions, etc.) whose basic aim was to liberalize education.⁵¹⁰

The second factor is the openness of the entire system, which creates sector-specific possibilities. What we have in mind here is primarily the possibility of international cooperation, which is conceivable at the level of individual institutes (departments), faculties and universities, but also at the level of individuals who in principle are not bound by any constraints – on the contrary, in an ideal situation their creativity and international links benefit the institutions they work in. Despite a number of problems, it can be stated that in the Czech Republic anyone (student or researcher) who accepts the basic rules of the game and is willing to put in the work has opportunities for development. Although there are many shortcomings and contradictions, in the last thirty years there have not been any at the systemic level that would prevent research and other work by truly talented and responsible people. In other words, the concept of the “myth” should not and does not aim to disguise the fact that educational processes and specific higher-education and university activities are “real” and are based on the opportunities provided by a free, democratic state.

Cultural history certainly offers a wider range of possibilities than we have put forward in this publication. Its contribution is perhaps to be found in the attempt to link current issues with historical context, the present with the past. This is a reflection of the fact that this text was written on the eve of a certain anniversary – the centenary of the establishment of Masaryk University in Brno, which we have the honour to be part of.

510 General context cf. Šafaříková, Vlasta et al.: *Transformace české společnosti 1989–1995*. Brno 1996.