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Myth and traditions of Central European university culture : (an introduction for international readers)

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MYTHS AND TRADITIONS OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY CULTURE (AN INTRODUCTION FOR INTERNATIONAL READERS)

In this brief introduction we would like to outline the main ideas which led us to writing this publication and the main thematic elements which we discussed with our academic colleagues from various Czech and international higher-education establishments.

The first thing to mention is that one of the recurring concepts was the fact that universities are a special kind of *institution*. Some of them date back to the Middle Ages – therefore, important questions regarding their historical continuity have to be considered. At present they are linked to three organizational groups – the church, the state and the city. At the same time, they are related to power and education, which power and social status often co-create and define. They create a unique system, containing a social role and a system of transferred symbols and traditions. Universities have probably gained in importance in the modern age and represent a path which more and more people embark on. And as historians we were naturally interested in the issue of how universities as a specific institution “bring up” their supporters, how they look after their legacy, and how specialist interests and social trends intersect within them. As part of the history of the institution we were also interested in how universities differ amongst each other, how reciprocal relationships develop and how the university operates within its own specific region.

It took some time before we agreed on the main interpretational key to use to describe historical events and trends as well as current issues. When laying the groundwork we decided on the terms “myths” and “traditions” in order to avoid older concepts concerning Central European universities, which were mainly associated with celebrating the university’s existence, with a specific ideology or with an obviously nationalist story. Therefore, we chose a more general interpreta-

tional scheme which, we believe, allowed us to examine more thoroughly specific university structures which have been handed down and are occasionally reflected upon. Our interest in myths can be explained using the example of the so-called *founding myth*. Universities, like states, churches, or nations in the modern era, have their own founding myths which do not necessarily have to be religious in character, but are often rooted in a kind of basic anthropological need to strengthen the institution, unify it and maintain its legacy. For our university in Brno, this founding myth was the fifty-year struggle over its establishment, involving the “clash between Czechs and Germans”, intervention by important figures including the politician and later president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš G. Masaryk, and lastly, the republican and secular models which connected the university to the establishment of the new democratic state (Masaryk University was founded some three months after an independent Czechoslovakia was declared!). It is very interesting for us how universities, and not only our own, use these founding myths, how they emphasize specific parts of them and how they create sub-institutions to cultivate the “university’s memory”. Another example might be the myth in the form of a large *metanarrative* such as the Marxist-Leninist story of the class struggle, of the “Battle of Armageddon of the world proletarian revolution followed by a golden era of jubilation in a classless society” (Stanislav Komárek), a story which influenced thousands of academics in the 20th century. In relation to this we felt there was enormous significance in the symbolic behaviour of universities and their celebrations, as through them we can see how a university has existed, how it presents itself to the public and how it demonstrates its usefulness to society.

From the outset we realized that we would require more than a national framework, despite the fact that the Czech Republic offers a variety of universities for comparative purposes: medieval, modern and those established as recently as after 1989; Metropolitan universities and regional ones, universities with a more general focus and those with particular specializations, etc. However, we had greater ambitions – for several reasons we wanted to take a look at universities within Central Europe. After the collapse of the Soviet empire it would seem that the *Central European region* is reawakening from a slumber of several decades and is starting to regain its cultural as well as political identity. Central Europe once more makes political “sense”, which does not mean that there are not significant differences between the countries of Central Europe. It is noteworthy that several of the universities were established within the Austrian empire which shaped Central European state unity over a long period, and thus offers a similar, comparable environment. This is why we have occasionally focused on Slovakia, Poland, Germany and Austria. Naturally, there were also instances when we had to take into account the global context, as Central European universities are now part of an international network consisting of universities from Western Europe, America and even Asia. Another key word in our book is *network* because we are aware of

the fact that the interdependence of science and education has always been a part of university life – as long as obstacles, such as ideological ones, were not in its path. The term *network* also relates to a specific type of academic and formative communication which is promoted at universities.

The identity of the Central European university has also been shaped by the dark period *under the great ideologies* of the 20th century. This is also something they share – most importantly through the loss of university freedom during the war and sometimes also the complete paralysis of university activity as a result of the Nazi's anti-nationalist measures, and also in the form of a “spiritual plague” during the communist era which curtailed the free exchange of information and scientific knowledge, while its class politics affected many people who were involved in academia, making their academic and personal lives a misery. In this sense, it is precisely in Central Europe where we can reflect on the perennial attempts to discover the meaning of university traditions and the very foundations of university culture.

However, our book also hopes to open discussions on current as well as historical topics. Of these, four probably have priority today: firstly, the contradiction between unavoidable internationalization (the use of English, exchange visits of teachers and students, guest lecturers, etc) and maintaining a distinct national character, which seems to be at least as important; secondly, the contradiction between unavoidable reforms which are required through changes in our understanding of education, economic pressure and the needs of society, and the necessity to preserve traditions which allow the university to settle in a specific region and area; thirdly, the contradiction between the traditional emphasis on specific disciplines and their methodologies, and the much-vaunted interdisciplinarity which is required in relation to project and grant policies which universities are heavily involved in; and fourthly, the contradiction between the requirements of scientific research and teaching – i.e. the relationship between them. These four themes certainly do not encompass all of the issues and contradictions in today's higher-education institutions, but they do represent a kind of basis which is also connected to the complex issue of financing higher education. A basis from which it is possible to move on to discussions which this modest publication also hopes to initiate.

Naturally, the book *Myths and Traditions of Central European University Culture* was also written for ourselves. We are not only observers of university culture from the outside – we are steeped within it, and it is from the inside that we try to orientate ourselves in the place we work and live. This is probably reflected in some of the book's priorities as well as its weaknesses.

Lukáš Fasora, Jiří Hanuš, May 2019