

The University of the future – or rather: The University as it should be

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Zusammenfassung

Im Folgenden werde ich versuchen, an Hand eines kurz gehaltenen Vergleichs zwischen der universitären (Aus-)Bildung in den USA und Deutschland und den diesen Systemen zugrunde liegenden Verständnissen von Bildung, aufzuzeigen, wie die Umstrukturierung an deutschen Universitäten nicht zu einer Verbesserung der Bedingungen für Lehre und Forschung führt, sondern im Gegenteil immer härtere Grenzen innerhalb der Institution zieht für das, was möglich ist und als wissenschaftliche Arbeit ausgegeben werden darf. Dabei möchte ich im Besonderen aufzeigen, dass der Vergleich mit den amerikanischen Eliteuniversitäten, der so häufig bei Prozessen der Neustrukturierung von Abläufen herangezogen wird, in Wirklichkeit nur dazu genutzt wird, Veränderungen, die stark von einem ökonomischen Diskurs, der auf die Schaffung von Vergleichbarkeit und Mehrwert fokussiert ist, zu überdecken. Schließlich werde ich kurz auf die Möglichkeiten einer Universität der Zukunft eingehen, die es schafft, sich von solchen Anforderungen zu lösen und so in der Tat unbedingt sein muss.

Schlüsselwörter: *Bildung, Ausbildung, Bologna-Prozess, Restrukturierung*

Summary

This paper discusses the recent changes within the German university education as a process of restructurization that in part relies on a pseudo-adaptation of the Anglo American system. This leads to a structuralization of formally unstructured areas. In order to make this apparent, I will briefly outline both German and

Anglo American educational systems to discuss the differing notions of education that each system has been grounded upon. As this paper illustrates, the German educational systems attempt to create new educational structures based on an Anglo American ideal is highly problematic, and, in fact, rather a pretext for an economization that is focussed on creating comparable education, ratable universities, and sellable research outcomes. This whole process is legitimized by an ideal that is itself discursively created and dependent upon the improvement of efficiency and the creation of ever more surplus value. Finally, I will address what the University of the future – a University without condition – could be like.

Keywords: *education, structure, Bologna process, unconditioned university*

Introduction

Given the theme of this issue, which focuses on the problems of psychological education and the education of psychology, I will try to outline a comparative perspective between two educational systems – Germany and the United States, as I have participated in both these systems as a student. This comparison focuses on the American system of graduate education and the German system, which is currently becoming on its face »Americanised« through the process of creating bachelor and master degrees. While this latter point – the adoption of the Anglo-American system in Germany – is a very interesting issue, initially, I wish to begin by addressing the topic of education, or more precisely, the dichotomy between education and training. At issue is the creation of a context, an atmosphere, an environment, and a surrounding that enables students – human beings engaged in the study of something – to learn, that is being able to treat knowledge in certain ways. The structure of the university as well as the restructuring processes that are currently taking place will be the starting point of my essay, as well as its endpoint. Importantly, I will address the question of what the University of the future should be like.

Education

The concept of education and its current use and origins can provide a hint towards a better understanding of the structuring processes of the American graduate school. Both the German *Bildung* and the American educational system focus

on enabling students to become »something«, namely, to become educated. In addition, however, *education* contains an educator, a person from whom the student learns. The Oxford Dictionary defines educating as giving »intellectual, moral, and social instruction to someone, typically at a school or university; give someone training in or information on a particular field« and education as »the systematic process of giving or receiving instruction«. From here the pathway is already predefined, the student – the one that wants to learn but does not know – has their self-determination restrained. Following this definition, the educational process erects hierarchical regimes between the one who knows and the one who does not know. The student is only free to make the decision of whether he or she wants to be taught and – to some extent – by whom. The specific content and structure of the student's education is not the student's concern. Rather it is a product of decisions made by the educator.

This interpretation of education is contrasted by the Late Middle English origin of the word *education* that was derived from the Latin *educare*. *Educare* is closely related to *educere*, which means »to lead out«, to put forward something, to create. Unfortunately this original meaning has been lost and has, over the years, been substituted by training: the act of teaching a person or animal a particular skill or type of behavior (Oxford Dictionary).

In Germany the construction of education is quite different. This difference begins with the linguistic connotations of *Bildung* and its numerous possible variations. The concept of *Bildung* as derived from German Idealism and influenced by the Humboldtian *Bildungsideal* means »the becoming of somebody,« the »to-be-human«. In addition, the German language differentiates between *Bildung* und *Ausbildung* – the latter being a more adequate translation of the English education because it entails a notion of being trained. The German idea of *Bildung* is therefore much more focused on the student, the learner, the person who wants to become educated, rather than concentrating on the educator.

These very interesting linguistic and etymological differences point towards a better understanding of the different conceptions of education and *Bildung* or *Ausbildung*. However, there is an entire set of structures that support the two educational systems. Systems which themselves contain many necessary inconsistencies that are produced and reproduced by the structures. To better understand education and *Bildung* it is necessary to examine these very structures that make

possible the actions that create a certain understanding of education and Bildung. Unfortunately, I am not able to undertake this endeavor in its full length here. Instead I will again try to pinpoint some markers that have come to my attention since I have participated as a student and graduate assistant in both systems.

The American graduate schools – Creating a piece of comparability

The most striking difference between the American and the German system is the differentiation between undergraduate and graduate education. Despite the changes that were introduced as a result of the European Bologna Process, stark differences between the two systems remain. For the most part, German adoption of bachelor and master degrees has been approached as nothing more than a renaming process, substituting *Vordiplom* or *Zwischenprüfung* for the bachelor degree, and substituting *Diplom* or *Magister* for the Masters degree meliorated with a stronger focus on clear curricula and grading.

In contrast, undergraduate education in the US usually starts at the age of 17 or 18. American students generally do not start to study a specific subject, rather in the first two years of their studies they are considered to be »undeclared«, meaning that they have not decided what they will choose as their major. What appears to be the realization of the medieval dream of a *studium generale* is, in fact, the representation of a highly structured environment that overflows with mandatory coursework and requirements that students have to fulfill. The first year or even the first two years of education are more comparable to the last two years of the German *Abitur* (high school), rather than what is considered to be the start of a university education in Germany.

But the most important fact about undergraduate education is not the way in which the students are treated, rather it is the very function of the undergraduate student within the larger educational system: A function that makes possible the ways in which undergraduates are treated and the ways in which they treat the institution. Undergraduate education – giving intellectual, moral, and social instruction to young adults – must serve as a way to finance the whole educational system. Undergraduates pay, depending on the college they are attending, up to \$50,000 a year. That money keeps the universities going and makes possible faculty research and graduate education. The fact that universities require their students to pay these vast amounts of money is itself a highly problematic topic

that requires further examination. Instead, for the purpose of this essay I will draw attention to some of the structural implications inherent in the financial demands of paying exorbitant sums for education. To pay money for something means to buy something, a purchaser expects a product. The money that is paid to purchase something indicates differing value of different product. Since education at different universities costs varying amounts of money, it is necessary to find ways of comparing the education a student can get – can buy – from different universities. In order to make these comparisons possible, education must be made comparable, that is it must be structured in ways that make visible the exact content of the education you buy.

This structure gives prospective students the possibility to compare educational institutions, since educational programs are equivalent. Moreover, the similarity at the educational level fosters universities to market their more trivial differences to students and thus create marketing images to sell their product. To facilitate these processes undergraduate education must contain identifiable curricula and comparable degrees. Finally, since students must compete against each other after graduation, universities must standardize the systems used to evaluate student performance. Thus, students must receive grades, to make possible the evaluation of the degree of success they attained in comparison to other students who have fulfilled similar structural requirements. In other words: The students are not only consumers but also co-creators of the product they are buying; a product that has to be defined clearly in order to be sellable and therefore leaves no room for not comparable content. This process is reproduced on two levels: on the macro-level of creating possibilities of comparison between different educational choices and on the micro-level where students subordinate themselves to the system of choosing classes to fulfill university requirements and often compete against each other to receive grades for their coursework. In addition, research and learning are not in any way a collaborative acts any more. Instead, 'research' becomes 'my research' or 'my research project' – the product »I« created – one strongly identifies with. Attacking a person's research project then inevitably means to attack the person themselves.

This entire system integrates professors, administrators and students within a well protected structure called »the university«. In order to participate in the system, students agree to surrender their autonomy to define their educational

path. By completing a university's degree requirements and entering the job market with that particular university's degree in hand, the students not only buy a »product« but also become a »product« created by the educational system and made ready to be sold (and excessively taught to sell themselves) on the job market. Because the university has to fulfill the promises connected with the product it originally sold to the student, who is funding the university, education focusses on training to do a job. This further means that the job market itself – or more precise, the job market as it is imagined by the university – gains considerable control over the structure of the university education. In other words: The university becomes commoditized, knowledge becomes a commodity, and the discourse of economic efficiency is engrafted onto the university.

From time to time, the system as a whole moves in a new direction in response to market forces. For example, in the past twenty years American universities have experienced grade inflation. That is, average grades have risen from »C's« to »B's.« While there has been much speculation about the cause of this trend, a significant reason is that students have demanded that they receive »more« for their education given the rising tuition costs. In essence, part of that »more« is the better grades, which hypothetically improve students' ability to land an initial job. Most universities now have their own »career services offices« that help students find employment. Since students are coming out of universities with higher average grades, fewer students are significantly disadvantaged because they performed at a mere »average« level. In other words, as grades rise, they become, step by step obsolete and lose their power to differentiate between students and thus can be seen as a process that is a product of the general movement towards more comparability and at the same time capable of undermining it.

The German system – or: The art of copying

Against most people's expectations, the German educational system is not as rigidly structured as the American system. In fact, especially in the social sciences it offers much more freedom, as well as more opportunity for students to choose courses according to their own interests. In addition, grades play a less important role from both the faculty and the students' perspective.

The problems the German system currently faces are of a different but somewhat comparable nature and strongly related to the recent restructuring pro-

cesses surrounding the creation of independent bachelor and master degrees. These recent developments however, are just symptoms of a larger process of change; a process that creates a focus on tangible outcomes of research, especially on measuring the value of research and research outcomes in order to make them comparable. The process of comparing begins with the insight that improving a system that is seen to be in necessity of improvement can best be accomplished by restructuring it in terms of the universities that are believed to be the best ones in the world, i.e. US-American universities. However, this process has largely ignored an important fact: The American university as such *does not actually exist*. Instead, there are several different ways of organizing institutions that call themselves universities and these several systems are abstracted and re-described towards an ideal, a coherent description of the Other, i.e. from a German perspective 'the foreign and different university'. This ideal and coherent description is then taken as a reference to be copied, only that the reference point does not exist. It is a copy itself, a copy that has, again, no reference. As a consequence, an image is reproduced that is influenced by descriptive systems that are purposefully but in a concealed way enriched with different political interests and vocabularies. The problem that emerges is that of an image that is taken for real, for a real reference that is to be followed; a reference that supposedly represents the better system that has to be copied in order to be more comparable and more successful in the comparison process.

Now, an inevitable effect of the process of copying a copy without reference – a copy that is (mis)taken for the original – is the disregard for the political implications that accompany and constitute these copies. This effect seems incredibly crucial to me and needs further (genealogical) analysis. For the remainder of this essay, however, I will focus on another effect that comes with the copying process: *The process of examining structures by means of structurization*. According to the created image of what a university should be like the existing organizational structures are examined in a very detailed fashion. This process of examination resembles a structuring and restructuring process that is itself already a comparison with what is falsely believed to be the best way of organizing a university, Furthermore it is used to covertly create a new structure (and as a final goal a coherent system) along the lines of the imagined ideal so that the attempt at comparison is possible. In other words: where there was no structure at all a structure is

created in order to make change towards a structure that is believed to be better and closer to the reference that is itself nothing more than a copy without a reference. This copy, which is dealt with as it was a reference, can be pushed in whatever direction it is needed to be since there is no actual real reference, no original it draws from but only an imagined entity. It easily becomes a tool and a weapon of the subordination to efficizing and structurizing processes that not only transform education to training but make efficiency the dominant goal.

The consequence of this ongoing process is the production of a *system*: a coherent set of structures and the eradication of ambiguities within the organization of the university. The resulting nonexistence of ambiguities then makes marginalized perspectives, that strongly depend on the possibility of ambiguities within the hegemonic discourse, silent. Thus, concrete possibilities of action, premises, and propositions of action are reduced to the existing and predetermined structure that is a product of a copying process of what was believed to be an original in the first place. But instead of *improving* the university an incredibly powerful congruency is created, a sameness that is not improving but merely reproducing.

The individual within that process of reproduction is a victim of the process of examination of structures by means of *structurization*. By expanding the control of what is done by whom in every single minute, the institution guaranties coherency and, hence, the possibility of comparing individual as well as collective output. Within that process, it even becomes possible to integrate critique and critical science by picturing them as static subjects for study within the system, rather than things done *by* the system or to the system. What is done within and by the institution becomes less important than how it is done. Instead of focusing on (possible) actions, the institution focuses on structure and its reproduction. In other words, the restructuring by means of copying a copy without reference, makes it impossible for the university to unfold (social) criticism, and therefore takes away a vast amount of its purpose.

The University of the future – or rather: The University as it should be

If there is one important thing to say about *the structure* of the new University – a University that would probably be the realization of a »classic« dream – then

it is this: *It should not exist*. The University as it should be must indeed be a place, an actual locality people can go to. But it must not exist as a system, nor as a manifested structure. The University must be the place with the possibility to oppose. It must be the place of overarching critique. There must not be anything beyond question, giving the University the chance to question itself, to question its own legitimacy. Instead of copying structures, the University invents and reinvents itself over and over again. Every scheme of a structure, every attempt to create hegemonies, needs to be countered from the margins by various marginalized perspectives that can be encountered everywhere. These ongoing, free-floating movements and fluctuations will inhibit any concrete structurization. The University is never real, never concrete, and therefore does not possess any power of its own. That makes it vulnerable, one might think, to the various powers »out there« that try to occupy and infiltrate what is thought of as a source of knowledge and power. In fact, it is that very lack of power that makes the University impregnable. The various marginalized forces forge towards the center and urge the center out towards the margins, and thus keep a constant flow that avoids any attackable manifestation of any kind.

At the same time, this University is not actively protected, not excluded from wider society. On the contrary, due to its focus on action, on change, on creation, it becomes an inseparable part of society. The University develops concepts that are adapted and revised and constantly criticized within the University itself; a University that takes place wherever it takes place, without condition.

The University of the future – or rather the University as it should be, must indeed be *without condition*. And this draws me to the final lines of this essay that will contain the only academic reference you will find on these pages – a reference that is in fact a copy itself, a copy without reference, a reproduction of what is more than critical:

»When I say ‘more than critical,’ I have in mind ‘deconstructive.’ (Why not just say it directly and without wasting time?) I am referring to the right to deconstruction as an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only about the history of the concept of man, but about the history even of the notion of critique, about the form and the authority of the question, about the interrogative form of thought. For this implies the right to do it *affirmatively* and *performatively*,

that is, by producing events (for example, by writing) and by giving rise to singular oeuvres (which up until now has not been the purview of either the classical or the modern Humanities).[...] Here, then, is what we could call, in order to call upon it, the unconditional University or the University without condition: the principal right to say everything, even if it be under the heading of fiction and the experimentation of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it.« (Jacques Derrida: »The University Without Condition«)

Reference

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