IN PRAISE OF THE
LIBERAL UNIVERSITY

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Contents

1. The normative idea of the modern liberal university
2. The contribution of liberal universities to the the public sphere of a civil society

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ASP Research Papers

1. The normative idea of the modern liberal university.[1]

To reason and to experiment is to contemplate and then approach the limits, to look over the edge and sometimes to hazard taking one more step. When the ground moves beneath our feet or drops away altogether, and we get the sensation that whatever used to provide our endeavors with stability, what used to be an element of repose and continuity as it imperceptibly stitched together the shreds of our memory and kept us happy in the illusion that we are the same as we were and will be, is vanishing; then we are overcome by a sense of disintegration and danger, and we suffer mingled feelings of loss and despondency. We realize that there is little more than to be continually making, un-making and re-making provisional, precarious - and ephemeral - realities.

Even if this should be one of the sorry truths of our condition, it so happens that human beings in the western part of the world once invented an institution to train us to confront that truth; to distill the knowledge of what the natural reality is that surrounds us and of which we are a part; what the reason is for our life forms; and what the meaning is of the ideas which we have formed about ourselves, and about our feelings, while we wait for, or do the impossible to put off or avoid our encounter with death.

Our mediaeval ancestors, after some initial hesitation, called this institution 'university'. It is true that, to begin with, universities were built to meet the various needs of kings, cathedral chapters, religious orders, cities, and diverse guilds and corporations. Nevertheless, the continuing existence of this organization over time, insofar as it is a 'living' organization because intellectual life courses through its veins (which has not always been the case), has depended upon reiteration of the fundamental (or sacred) experience of the search for truth, and therefore on the authenticity of the response of the scholastic community (professors and students) to the call (the 'vocation') of the depths: for the truth which lives in profundi-

ties, or 'at the bottom of the well', according to the image of Democritus.

In search of true knowledge: the avatars of the liberal university

Training in the search for true knowledge, in its transmission to following generations, in critical discussion of it in the heart of a community of seekers after the truth, with no guarantee whatsoever that the truths at which we arrive are either useful or reassuring (they may not preserve the world we want preserved, they may not transform it in the direction in which we want it transformed), has formed the fundamental orientative nucleus of university practices from the normative point of view of the founders of the modern liberal university. This is the tradition in which we place ourselves and it is the one which corresponds to their interpretation of the continuity between the new university and the ancient, mediaeval one. The presence or absence of this training is, likewise, the criteria which, for those of us within that normative tradition, allows us to distinguish between adherence to, and distorsions of, the idea of the university when we observe present university practices.

The institutionalization of the ceaseless, unpredictable, search for truth, because the horizons are wide and the foundations are (or should be treated as) uncertain, has been entrusted to a community subject to the combined actions of what were, in other times, kings, chapters or guilds, and today are governments, businessmen, professional corporations, political parties, unions, social movements, ecclesiastical authorities and other organizations. All of the them are almost always imbued with a sense of having privileged access to incontrovertible truths, and they are prepared to defend their practical interests with vigor, while ignoring those of others to the greatest possible extent.

In these circumstances, those of us who believe in the tradition of the normative idea of the university as a community of seekers of true knowledge, have felt it necessary to specify, repeatedly, the 'missions' or 'aims' of a university. In the renaissance of the university, which many attribute to the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1809 under the auspices of Humboldt, the predominant themes were investigation of the truth; an education related to the search for truth and, therefore, more of an education in the transmission of ways of advancing knowledge than the transmission of acquired knowledge; and what was called *Bildung*,

or the formation of a moral character proper to a 'liberal' human being in the dual sense of 'free' (cf. *libre* in Spanish) and 'generous', that is, a human beeing predisposed to giving or sharing his goods with the rest of the community.

As is well-known, the example of Berlin, where reformist aristocrats like Hardenburg, Stein, and Humboldt himself united with enlightened philosophers in an 'alliance of discourse' (Wittrock, 1993: 314), spread first to all the German universities. Later, it extended its influence to the systems of higher education in England, France and North America and, through them, to all the other western-type societies which, apparently, appropriated the normative idea of the university from the German universities. Throughout the 19th century there were important changes in these universities, in particular, in the increase in the specialization and professionalization of disciplines. Moreover, the German model was never adopted in its entirety, it was always in combination with regional experiences, giving rise to numerous institutional hybrids, amongst which the North American hybrid was to demonstrate the greatest capacity for adaptation. In any case, the tradition of the modern liberal university (that is, the university most similar to the normative idea of a liberal university) was to be devoted to the three missions already mentioned of research or investigation, teaching and a liberal education. (And these happen to be precisely the ones to which Ortega refers in his lecture of 1930: Ortega y Gasset, 1965).

The missions of research and teaching always appeared relatively clear, at least in principle. The question came down to how to accomplish them in the most efficient way, and how to articulate them. Research laboratories allocated to university faculties or departments, or to extramural institutes connected to the universities (in the same way as those which, after the Great War, would be known as Max Planck Institutes) were all various means of attempting this articulation. There was always the possibility of the university doing very little or no research, but it would then fall short of the ideal, fail to fulfill its mission and lose its reputation to the benefit of competitors at home or abroad because it was assumed that it would provide professional teaching of a lower standard.

The third objective, a liberal education, was always in danger of receiving no more than rhetorical recognition before being sacrificed to the other two. In fact, there were many belonging to German universities who believed that the university system, in spite of its apparent solidity, rested upon a fragile equilibrium between the legacy of "the golden age of Goethe" (that miraculous gift bestowed on Germans, to quote Meinecke; Wittrock, 1993: 321) and the demands of constructing the state and the nation. These were very powerful economic, social and political demands, bringing heavy pressure for the development of professional research and teaching. In fact, towards the end of the 19th century and in the first third of our own, there were several far-sighted and perceptive thinkers, Nietzsche, Jaspers and Weber among them, who were conscious of the danger, inherent in these pressures, for the development of communities of free scholars, seekers of the truth, and people who wanted to get to the root of things and aspired to comprehensive knowledge of surrounding reality.

Nevertheless, the aim of a liberal education survived in places like England and the United States, based on the formation of undergraduates;[2] and continues to do so to this day. However, the idea of a liberal education can respond to two very different acceptations as regards its content and the manner of its acquisition. One acceptation is the formation obtained by attending classes, reading books, writing papers and participating in learned discussions. All of this leads to the obtention of formalized knowledge. The other acceptation is the formation of character by acquiring habits, and the knowledge of 'how?' rather than 'what?' as Oakeshott would say (Oakeshott, 1991: 13). It was in the latter way that the best English educational institutions, universities or otherwise, originally approached the problem of a liberal education.

Consider, for example, the manner in which Willian Cory, a master at Eton, described this problem to his students over one hundred and thirty years ago:

"…you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours that you have spent on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of

[2] Or high school diploma holders with a general university formation which prepares them for a Bachelor of Arts degree in accordance with the tradition of the mediaeval university.

lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions".

But you go to a great school, not for knowledge so much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness". (Quoted in Rosovsky, 1990: 108).

We can observe from this text how Cory's appeal to his students is directed towards the obtainment, not of knowledge, but of a way of life (of 'habits and skills)', so that even the call to self-knowledge refers less to the development of theoretical cognition than to the practical knowledge of how to look after oneself, how to interpret situations in which one might find oneself, how to learn what it is reasonable to expect of oneself in different circumstances, and how to control one's feelings (as much as possible) in order to give of the best of oneself in adverse conditions. What he sought to achieve was not so much self-knowledge as the ethos or moral character of people who are thoughtful, sober, courageous in the pursuit of truth, and jealous of their freedom of judgement.

Stated in this way, it is clear that we are not talking about an objective which could be achieved by a change in curriculum, by the introduction of subjects like general culture or humanistic studies, or by re-designing theoretical teaching. In Germany, in the early years of this century, it was thought that the solution to the problem of universities that appeared to be about to lose 'their spirit', because they were increasingly orientated towards specialized investigation and professional teaching, lay in the recuperation of philosophy as the cornerstone of the university (philosophy encompassing the humanities, the social sciences and, perhaps, 'the physical idea of the world'). This is a similar approach to, in its time, the Orteguian suggestion of "making a Faculty of 'Culture', the nucleus of the university" (Ortega y Gasset, 1965: 63 and ff.); and more recently the insistence of Alan Bloom on the "good old Great Books approach", which consists of meditative reading and the discussion of the classics (Bloom, 1987: 344).

But what I am actually discussing is an objective which is only attainable by re-designing university life, in order to consolidate daily practical experiences of freedom, self-discipline, distance, communication, competition and cooperation, on which to be able to build the corresponding habits that should eventually result in the character formation of free people. And the question remains of how to make, above all, the institutional design, but also the curriculum, a success.

The answer does not lie in the idealism which is blind to reality in its moral appeal to be free. Neither does it lie in an accumulation of humanist disciplines. It has to be the result of a reflective reading of institutional experiences undergone by western universities over the last two centuries; because the way to the realization of a normative idea has to be via institutions: that is, rules of behavior, hedged with justifications and accompanied by effective sanctions. Without institutions, ideas remain floating indecisively between dream and reality.

The US experience

In my opinion, the evolution of the American university system (or at least, the fifty or so top universitites in this system) over the last one hundred years, and the institutional design which has resulted from this evolution (partly due to deliberate intervention, and partly in a spontaneous or semi-spontaneous way) offer a plausible answer to this question. In saying this, I do not wish to take this university reality, as a whole, for a model, nor to eulogize it. It is only too easy for anyone who has lived immersed in the American university system for some time (as I have done as both student and professor for some ten years) to reel off the many defects to be found within it.

Life in an ivory tower, to the extent that many universities cultivate the atmosphere of a small town far from the hubbub of daily life, is fertile ground for the development of petty quarrels and interminable maneuvering, such as Nabokov describes in his novel about the endearing, eccentric professor Pnin, who lived surrounded, half-protected and half-threatened, by them (Nabokov, 1957). It is also almost natural that people inclined to forget their own origins any further back than the second generation of their forebears, should be naive and presumptuous enough to enter into the

historical memory of more ancient peoples with over-hasty, superficial curiosity. It is likewise true that research can be made overly subordinate to the demands of powerful organizations which provide the necessary means; that 'academic cartels' may hinder the development of the universities as market-places for the free-exchange of ideas (Bartley III, 1990); and that a spirit of submission is due not so much to power *per se* as to the tyranny of the present, typical of people who live in a constant state of urgency. Haste to achieve can create in them the need to impress or the need to be liked (such as happens to film producers who produce slick movies that openly pursue audience ratings with carefully calculated messages that border on the unconventional without ever crossing the line, but expert in suggesting transgression). This makes them waste too much energy in redefining the disciplinary field merely for the purpose of modifying the stage-lighting and finding the right label, packaging or headline to attract attention.

The list of defects could go on, but apart from the fact it would probably be even longer and more critical of university experience in other countries, what remains, when the defects have been listed, is the reality of a university system from which everyone tries to learn because it is 'the best practice in town': the best available in the world today.

The system did not spring up overnight; neither was it even the invention of the Americans, at least in its present form. To a large extent it was imported from Europe. Nevertheless, it is interesting that, almost from the first, the importation of the German model was made with the introduction of extremely important changes and other details. The Americans adopted research as their preferred objective and 'research' universities soon came to be considered the universities *par excellence* whereas 'teaching' universities came in a bad second. But research was closely tied to teaching (in departments, not faculties). Access to research funds took place in competitive, relatively open, market conditions in which the dividing line between the public and private sectors was soon blurred or erased. The allocation of resources was left in the hands of networks of colleagues, whose central function in the educational system was reinforced by the institutional distance of the system from the public powers, as much by the absence of formal subordination of the academic authorities to the Ministry of Education as by the

fact that the professors were not, or did not consider themselves to be, public officials. Added to this was their concern for establishing an organizational design with strong academic authority or leadership, and active, responsible boards of trustees. The consequence was to maximize the autonomy of each university and minimize interference by a public administration; without harming a tradition of the (inward) exercise of strong authority in a framework of uses and conventions (and formalized rules) of continuous consultation, accountability and communication (Rosovsky, 1990: 278).

The result has been a collection of autonomous corporative units which operate on the 'high seas' of various competitive markets: a market of professors quite likely to move on, a market of students avid to achieve the best educational experience available, a market of demand for research on the part of innumerable public and private agencies with interests in the most diverse of fields. In sum, the result is an institutional configuration of the university as an 'organized anarchy' (Cohen and March, 1974) which is outwardly subjected to the competition of other similar 'organized anarchies' that compel it to examine and diversify its offer, and to keep a close eye on how it is placed in a hierarchy of prestige that is always under review and therefore constantly changing.

This open, competitive system has been capable of adapting fairly well to the great transformation of contemporary universities which took place in the fifties and sixties when 'elite' universities became universities 'of the masses'. It continues to pioneer research and teaching methods, to incorporate new educational content, and to promote constant innovations and experiments of all kinds (with varying degrees of success), and to contribute to their diffusion. However, what I really wish to emphasize is that an institutional system of this nature, by the way in which it functions, favors the acquisition of practical knowledge that is extremely important for the formation of people appropriate to a civil or open, liberal society.

In effect, under certain conditions, but never automatically, the system favors the development of a) strong community identities; b) ties between the surrounding social fabric and the university institution; c) intellectual and moral communities made up of like minds in the university as a whole; and d) the university itself as a moral community *sui generis*, whose pulse beats at the same rate as

4

the society in which it lives, but which retains sufficient distance from it to fulfill its commitment to universal or universalist values, such as service to the truth, that transcend, and always will transcend the local community, region or nation of reference.

It must be remembered that the kind of community I am talking about is special. It is a community united by common rules, not by a common objective, by the way in which each individual decides to do his own thing while appreciating other ways of thinking, by reciprocal loyalties which involve respect for others' differences and idiosyncrasies, and by an authority which is simply the keeper of the game rules and not an individual or collective that tries to impose their own objectives as common objectives. I am talking about a community of free individuals, united around a series of formal, abstract rules in a nomocratic, not a teleocratic, order.

It just so happens that, in spite of its many imperfections and distorsions, the American institutional design comes close to that design and to the realization of that order. As a result, it fosters the 'habits' or 'virtues' of free people, encouraging each one, be they student or professor, to discover their own path while participating in a continuous debate on the game rules. This assumes the creation of an environment favorable to freedom of choice being continually put to the test, because individuals receive the stimulus of numerous decisions which they have to take. In this sense, the ways in which the American and the continental European university environments treat the problem of the (negative) freedom of the student is highly significant.

In the typical continental European university (at least of the French, Spanish or Italian kind), students protect their freedom by establishing opaqueness and distance between themselves and their professors and academic administrators. They view professors' questions as threats to or (illegitimate) interference in their territory. They feel that if they accept the invitation to participate (which may or may not be) contained within a question, they could fall into a trap. A lack of attention from professors, a lack of curiosity about their opinion on the part of their companions, demonstrated by the tendency of so many to interrupt, confirm them in the idea that there is not much to be hoped from debate in a formal academic space of this nature. A particular student may not be that interested in

ideas, but if he were, he would normally decide that life, in the sense of intellectual life, would be better lived elsewhere.

The typical American student (at least at the fifty leading universities) lives immersed in an environment of stimuli which give him no rest, which oblige him to take center stage and to ask and intervene in an active way. He finds himself called upon to decide what he thinks about matters, and cannot be satisfied by simply finding out what is thought about them by others. There appears to be no escape, nowhere to hide from this solicitude; and even if there were (and fortunately, there is), the spotlight and the public space exert their attraction on him, just as the arena attracts the gymnast eager to try out his strengths.

In each case, the exercise of freedom is substantially different and engenders different kinds of people. In the case of North America, it engenders people accustomed to affirming their freedom and doing it publically: in the public space. And this finally leads me to the heart of the matter, which is the contribution of the liberal university to civil society.

2. The contribution of liberal universities to the public sphere of a civil society.

As the expression 'civil society' has so many and varied acceptations, I would like to make my interpretation of the term clear to the reader. The common acceptation identifies civil society with the world of social movements and associations not subordinated to the state apparatus: what some call the 'social fabric'. From my point of view, this fabric forms part of civil society, but it is only one of its components within a framework of some specific institutions. Extremely varied kinds of social fabrics exist in all types of societies, which are relatively autonomous from public authorities, but they are not all 'civil' fabrics or of the kind of fabric of a 'civil society' (as Gellner demonstrates in his analysis of segmented agrarian societies: Gellner, 1994). To be 'civil', as well as being independent of public authority, they must have the texture appropriate to a plurality of voluntary associations that are independent of each other and not subject to a hierarchical-corporative structure; they must have significant access to the public space in order to operate there in an autonomous way; and, as the logical consequence of this, they must find the economic bases by which to maintain

themselves in some form of market, and not depend on a command economy or the authoritarian allocation of resources.

Civil society in its broadest acceptation has five institutional components, comprising the (above mentioned) social fabric of a plurality of associations, economic markets and a public space or sphere, some general rules and a limited, accountable public authority. This conception first appeared (formulated in a somewhat different manner) in connection with certain historical experiences, principally in the Anglo-Saxon world, in around the 18th century. But it is important to distinguish between an analytical and empirical dimension and a normative dimension in this conception, because this distinction suggests that the historical realization of the ideal type is merely contingent on a variety of conditions, and lastly on (largely unpredictable) human choices. There is only the 'possibility' and not the '(historical) necessity' of civil society, and this applies to the past as well as to the future. So that if it were to come about anew or again, here and there, it could also be distorted, lost, or disappear again, in a wide variety of circumstances.

Now, t The public sphere occupies a crucial position in the system of civil society as a whole. It is the space in which the associations and individuals who make up the social fabric act in their capacity as citizens and, as such, as participants in a civic conversation, to discuss the nature of the common good (essentially, though not exclusively: the nature of the rules for coexistence among free individuals), and the means for accomplishing it. I believe that the university, insofar as it lives up to the normative idea of the liberal university, is an extremely important player in the public sphere and, hence, in civil society.

The liberal university contributes to the public sphere of a civil society in various ways. Some of its contributions consist of satisfying the demands of the political, economic and social forces in its environment in one particular way and not another. These forces can exert pressure in favor of research which promotes the economic and military interests of the country, or of the ruling groups in question. They demand specialized professional teaching; and, though more discreetly, and as a by-product of the above, they want the university to contribute to the renewal of the elites and administrative staff of the corresponding political, economic and social organizations. But *if* these social demands are satisfied by a university which adheres to the normative idea of the liberal university (and not by a university of any other sort), the research will include a reflective dimension, and a call for some form of responsibility on the part of scientists towards the community. The professional teaching will make it plain that the profession considers itself justified by some ideal type of service, and at least part of its professional power will take the form of fiduciary power. The turnover of elites through university experience (which includes being exposed also to a critical, dissident culture) will be related to the attainment of some form of universalist ideal. (This is, perhaps, what Parsons' 'educational (meritocratic) revolution' referred to, thereby making the criteria of the equality of citizens' status compatible with those of equality of opportunity; Parsons, 1971: 97.)

Universalistic goals and particularistic distortions

Nevertheless, there are other contributions which depend, not on the social demands made on the university, but on the demands the university must make of itself if it aspires to be a liberal university. It is these self-imposed demands which I now wish to examine.

A most crucial demand a liberal university must make of itself consists of ensuring the pre-eminence of universalism over particularism. The fact is that, as I have mentioned before, the ('born-again') liberal university of our times emerged and developed in a decisive moment of nation-building and state-building. In its original messages and accomplishments cultural motivations were inextricably mixed with realpolitik. In the genesis of the University of Berlin, the reverberation of the cannons at the Battle of Jena formed the backdrop to the passion of Winckelmann for classical Greece, the *sapere aude* of Kant and the legacy of Goethe and his efforts to achieve the 'sentimental education' of a complete human being. Kojève describes Hegel's situation to us ("sitting at the table, he writes… he listens to the sounds from afar… they are not just any sounds… they are cannons… they are Napoleon's cannons" Kojève, 1969; 34) at the time of writing the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*: mindful of the here-and-now, of the historical-universal moment which is the overriding object of his speculation, and which is symbolized by that battle. And let us not forget that Hegel was to hold the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Berlin from 1818 until his death in 1831.

So, what is the significance of the Battle of Jena to which the *Phenomenology* 'responds'? Or, what is the significance of the anticipated arrival of the French troops in Berlin, which makes the foundation of the university possible? Among other things, there was the not-so-insignificant detail that approval of Humboldt's design benefited from the power vacuum left by the Prussian King and his cabinet, on abandoning the capital; a vacuum left unoccupied by the invader. However, its significance is interpreted by Hegel and those enlightened reformists as the symbol of confrontation between the *Zeitgeist* embodied by Napoleon, and the old regime. For them, it was like the call of destiny (*resonant* in Beethoven's Fifth) to which they responded with a self-affirmation at once humanistic and universal, patriotic and local. In this respect, Hardenburg, Stein and Humboldt himself understood it as a call for the awakening of the German nation, contributing to the reform of the state, the rationalization of its bureaucracy, the liberation of peasant serfs, the organization of an army of patriots (who were to contain Napoleon at Leipzig and defeat him at Waterloo); and the foundation of a university which should be, in Humboldt's vision, the epitome of the moral and emotional community of the nation, with the mission of being its stimulus and its sum and substance. In fact, this 'nationalist-statist' mission was to be incorporated into Western university tradition by one nation after another.

As I indicated earlier, the balance between the nationalist-statist complex, with the addition of the socioeconomic powers, on the one hand, and 'Goethe's legacy' on the other, was, and continues to be, fragile and unstable. The universities have always lived in danger of reducing their humanist legacy to a recital of pious declarations, and subordinating it to the demands of economic and political life. Not unconscious of the danger, the German universities allowed themselves to fall headlong into it. Not only the Germans: the spectacle of French and German academies face to face, so to speak, across the trenches of the First Great War, entering into the 'spirit of the war', was appalling. It showed, in the most atrocious way, the lack of 'mental sobriety' of those illustrious (though not enlightened) academics. Those were the nationalistic professors who sowed the seeds that were to be reaped by young totalitarian (fascist, nazi or communist) students, who displayed the energy that we knew before and after the Second World War, and did everything possible to

destroy the liberal university, attempting to make the connotation 'liberal' a cause for ridicule.

Observation of those pathologies, and their lesser forms of authoritarian populism which continue to have considerable sway among European Christian-democrats, social democrats and conservatives, may encourage us to reaffirm the normative idea of the liberal university. According to this, the university must keep faith, above all else, with its universal mission. If, in the university pantheon, the highest god is truth, the university community must be, primarily, a community of seekers of the truth. Over and above its local loyalties, it must aim at crossing boundaries towards a universal conversation of free spirits wherever they are to be found. It is true that a university has certain obligations towards its homeland of demi-gods and local heroes, but it has to interpret those obligations correctly as a function of its ultimate values. Its principal duty, in this respect, consists of encouraging its local community to be respectful of the truth and open to the world. To do this, the university has to channel, domesticate and civilize nationalist and localist emotions. It has to put them in their place, which is estimable but subordinate to the higher purpose of creating a society of rational citizens, capable of confronting their local demagogues, and capable of contributing first to the creation of large, civilized groups and, finally, to a universal civil society. Thus, according to this normative idea of the liberal university, it has a commitment to fundamental values and to the project of a well-ordered universal society.

The (fragmentary, interrupted) tradition of those who adhere to this normative idea may, one day, allow us to overcome the (transient) stage of Western universities which are contaminated by the nationalist and statist obsessions of the last two centuries. This contamination is reflected in the predisposition of so many professors to work at the behest of the incumbent authority, without the necessary distance, and in the tendency of so many students to embrace the causes of primordial nationalism.

A sense of detachment towards the world as 'given', and of the limits of reasoning

I wish to end by returning to the beginning, when I suggested that the basic impulse of intellectual life, that breathes vitality into the university tradition, has been, and continues to be, the aspiration of living in search of the truth. To

some extent, this is living, with Kierkegaardian fear and trembling, in the proximity of truth which recedes indefinitely: living in a roofless edifice with shifting foundations and unattainable horizons.

Not so very long ago, many people, with or without a higher education, still felt that science would allow them access to the truth or 'possession' of the truth. In more recent generations many of us have become used to brooding on the writings of Karl Popper and W.O. Quine, seeking solace for our hazardous search for certainty, either in the (minimalist) certainty of refuted errors, or alternating between the crucial or recalcitrant experience which escapes us and the analysis of the very debate in which to locate the search. And while we explore the language with which we can best express our perseverance in pursuit of what classical writers called 'things themselves', we know that each step leaves the flanks of our discoveries open to criticism and gives rise to new questions. Alert to all the dimensions, we alternate between concentration and digression, as though science were no longer the dwelling of a sedentary people who build edifices, but open territory traversed by nomads.

If this kind of intellectual experience belongs at the heart of life in a liberal university, the consequences that follow on from this are extremely important for the contribution which this university can make to the public sphere of a civil society. These consequences imply fostering two traits of character: a certain detachment towards the world as 'given' and a sense of the limits of reasoning, that may bear on the way people approach the public debates.

Firstly, those who commit themselves to this experience have to become accustomed to treating ideas and theories (including those of 'nation', 'class', 'state', 'left, and 'right', for example) as mental artifices which require continuous revision and depuration, and which must be tested by analysing the consequences of the diverse uses to which they can be put. They must also become accustomed to weighing up the 'facts' which supposedly prove the assertions that abound in public debate, with a certain scepticism; and to taking care with language, in order to use it with clarity and precision so as not to create confusion or allow misundertandings. It is logical that people who acquire these habits should develop a certain repugnance for demagogic practices, and a certain mistrust of political vehemence (in which they will perceive the mask which usually disguises insecurity or baseness). It is also to be hoped that they will use the 'idols of the tribe' with sobriety and moderation, and that they will temper, in themselves and in others subject to their example, the tendency to use those idols to justify violence against other people, or to deprive them of their wealth or reputation.

Secondly, this intellectual experience offers a self-corrective to the hubris or arrogance which the university may easily cultivate, suggesting, at the same time, the limits of its contribution to the public sphere. In effect, scientific experience warns about the limits of knowledge and guards against abuses of intellectualism or constructivism, absolute, ideological politics, and the dreams of reason which can produce monsters. In turn and *sensu contrario*, this experience, far from propitiating a 'rupture' with daily discourse, which so many misinterpret, lays the foundation for a re-evaluation of the local, practical and tacit knowledge of ordinary people, their common sense and their elemental feelings of equity and decency. With all their defects and limitations, these feelings and common sense offer the best cognitive and emotional bases available for a free or civil society.

Universities can be, and have of course been, the abode of censors, inquisitors, dogmatic scholars, prophets of radical change in the world and other similar species, whom it has nourished with authoritarian practices, excesses of intransigent, remorseless controversy, and bitter disputes over academic power. But there are so many other examples in which, generation after generation, in the daily, authentic, scientific practice of many of their members, there has been an effort to approximate universities to the normative idea of the liberal university: balanced, tempered in its judgements, conscious of its local obligations, but faithful to its own god - the demanding, distant, eternal god of truth. They are our witnesses. Let us trust in them. From their place in our recollections of a past that did exist, and not as the shadows projected back from an inexistent future, they represent the reason and the foundation of our hopes.

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