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Higher Education and the New Society of Third Millennium*

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1. Education: Expansion and Hostility

Almost half a century ago, the band Pink Floyd had an explosive success with their song “*We Don’t Need No Education*”. In 1968, students on riot in American campuses or in the great European universities were shouting, as democratically as possible, “*il est interdit d’interdire*”, militating against the Vietnam War. They were also protesting against famous traditional courses, such as archaeology or classical languages. In March 2006, in Paris, young rebel crowds had set on fire not only cars and police stations, but also schools and destroyed university buildings, starting with the Sorbonne, old symbol of the *Republic of Philology* in Europe and in the entire world. Consequently, democracy generated policies that eventually led to an unprecedented expansion of education as a system, but also to anarchical protests against the expanding system. Why is that so?

Higher education for a democratic society in the 21st century is a topic we can talk about either in prefabricated and politically correct formulas or, on the contrary, we can profoundly reflect upon it in an attempt to comprehend not only what connects the two concepts—democracy and higher education, but also what might disconnect them and even contradict them. What do we, democratic university people, need to do if we wish these two concepts to complement each other? I believe that we should start by elaborating a few theses, which we can then debate further. I would like to propose a few axes for this debate: the first refers to *upstream* education related to the academic stage, the way the past and the social environment put a mark on the university; the second examines the contribution of universities to democracy within the societies which developed them—meaning at *downstream* of university, and the third would refer to universities themselves and their perspectives in a society of knowledge and of a real democracy, that which we all undoubtedly desire.

We can understand that it is natural for any educational process to meet a certain resistance from its beneficiaries. We can understand that the European teenagers and youth aspire to have the advantages of a competitive world, but they refuse uncertainties. We can notice that in a society that made higher education its main social elevator, education is challenged at the very moment when the elevator does not function anymore. We may get sad, or we can try to start the discussion over from its beginnings in the 19th century, a century that empowered education, and most particularly academic education, with the meritocratic system as the position of engine in our travel towards knowledge, instead of favoring hereditary elites of the old aristocratic regime.

It may be possible that hostility against school, as it sometimes appears nowadays, arises also from the fact that the educational system is disconnected from the realities of contemporary society. I do not refer here to the often called-upon adjustments to the labor market requirements. Numerous experiences and experiments have proven that the maximum adaptation to these exigencies is not shown by the young beneficiaries of an early specialized education, either we talk about IT or other modern specializations, but, on the contrary, by those who have passed through a training, intelligently centered on the traditional fundamentals of science and culture and who gain thus a flexibility that allows them to further choose the highest fields for their professional career.

2. Reinventing School

In order to avoid these expensive confusions, we must reinvent the school so that it will know how to preserve and use its passionate interest for exploration, for bringing out the inherent novelty and curiosity for knowledge in the student. It must be a school that transforms every child’s passion for stories into an ability to use proper words. It must be a school that puts in service of the didactic process all the colorful fantasies of childhood, and the explosive inventiveness of teenage. Briefly, it should be a school that awakens the joy of learning. Such a school integrates and does not compete with the almost infinite information means that today’s society generates continuously. We will have to reinvent school so that it will not exclude, but include. It should take into account every child’s and teenager’s talents, so as to offer him or her a customized path that will tap his or her personality to the fullest. Under present circumstances, of the Informatics and Information revolution, the biggest effort necessary to reinvent the school radically is not one involving economic effort, but one concerning intellectual endeavour.

Universities, which are at the same time beneficiaries of the educational process and its latest corollary, have the duty to reflect upon this vital issue and to fight for a real democracy that is based on knowledge and for a new humanism capable of radically rebuilding our contemporary society.

Will this process be adopted by our democracies? Will the families, the local communities, the mayors, the local administration, the governments, parliaments, be willing to take the chance to support and finance such a radical reform, to open the way to an adaptive, flexible education, that is able to mould itself on any child’s, adolescent’s, adult’s or third age active people’s needs and potentials?

The University, conceived as a great forum, will last as a part of the democratic world as long as it continues to promote critical thinking, reason, pluralism, human values. The confrontation of ideas in a critical, rational manner requires not only an acceptance

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of differences, but also paying rightful attention to others' views. Because concepts and experience might become obsolete if there is no interest, interrogations and freshness in the youth's thinking, to give debates color and to generate novelty, meaning the *creative technologies* needed in a knowledge society.

3. The Prospective Mission

We live in a world that wants to prove the triumph of democracy, freedom and cooperation, an open world, a world of constant communication and interaction, a world whose perpetual motion cannot be stopped and where isolation would mean a form of collective suicide. Yet, this world is not yet ready for globalization. If we want to understand why, it would be the right moment for us to turn to the University's prospective mission. It is the moment when the university should find within itself the necessary resources to give a new impulse to the world we live in.

Academic institutions' identity and role in the assessment of 21st century challenges no longer need to be demonstrated. The specialists we educate today will be active until 2050-2060, so their projective capacity represents an indispensable component in this process. In this sense, adopting a development strategy requires a few prior clarifications regarding anticipation: the general framework of the society's evolution, the forecasting of supply-demand ratio of the academic capitalization valorization, the assessment of human potential and material resources.

My generation left many questions unanswered. I have no regrets for, if a new generation asks the same questions, the answers will undoubtedly be different from the ones we would have delivered, as the world the older generations used to live in has changed. We sought answers to what we hoped to be a world of certainties. The only thing we know for sure today is that this world will be a world of uncertainties and that answers to the exact same questions will change more rapidly than we can imagine. Professors, researchers and university graduates are, today, the measure of future. Thus, universities may be considered an essential partner in the endeavor of shaping the future.

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