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The Classical German Idea of the University Revisited, or on the Nationalization of the Modern Institution

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to provide a philosophical and historical background to current discussions about the changing relationships between the university and the state (and the university and society) through revisiting the classical “Humboldtian” model of the university. This historical detour is intended to show the cultural rootedness of the modern “idea of the university”, and its close links to the idea of the modern national state. The background is provided by the discussion of such German philosophers and scholars as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich W.J. Schelling (the founding fathers of the University of Berlin) in the 19th century, as well as the controversy between Karl Jaspers and Jürgen Habermas in the 20th century. The paper consists of the following sections: the university and society: basic questions; the modern university, the nation-state, and “retrospective constructions; the three main principles of the Humboldtian university; the nationalization of European universities: serving the nation; the national aspect of the German *Bildung*; the pursuit of truth vs. public responsibilities of the modern university; the (foundational) idea of the university vs. its embodiments (the exposition of the Jaspers/Habermas controversy); the university and the state: a modern pact; the renewal of the university vs. the regeneration of the nation; knowledge for its own sake and Wilhelm von Humboldt; Humboldt’s university vs. the “Humboldtian” university; the University of Berlin: new weapons to continue the struggle lost in the battleground; Humboldt and the role of *Bildung*; the rebirth of the German nation through education (Johann Gottlieb Fichte?); giving birth to a new world and the Heideggerian overtones; the state, the university, and academic freedom (Friedrich Schleiermacher); philosophy and education (Friedrich W.J. Schelling); and conclusions.

