

## Revisiting The Classical German Idea of the University (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 through revisiting the classical “Humboldtian” model of the university as discussed in classical German philosophy. This historical detour is intended to highlight the cultural rootedness of the modern idea of the university, and its close links to the idea of the modern national state. The paper discusses the idea of the university as it emerges from the philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schleiermacher, as well as – in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Karl Jaspers and Jürgen Habermas. More detailed questions discussed include the historical pact between the modern university and the modern nation-state, the main principles of the Humboldtian university, the process of the nationalization of European universities, the national aspect of the German idea of culture (*Bildung*), and the tension between the pursuit of truth and public responsibilities of the modern university. In discussing current and future missions and roles of the institution of the university today, it can be useful to revisit its foundational (modern) German idea. In thinking about its future, it can be constructive to reflect on the evident current tensions between traditional modern expectations of the university and the new expectations intensified by the emergence of knowledge-based societies and market-driven economies. From the perspective of the tensions between old and new tasks of the university, it is useful to look back at the turning point in its history.

### 1. The university and society: basic questions

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 highlight the cultural rootedness of the modern idea of the university, and its close links to the idea of the modern national state. The basic questions about the relationship between the university and society have remained fundamentally the same throughout recent centuries; what changes (from time to time) is the answers to them – which may become

inadequate or irrelevant. Guy Neave in his discussion of “Universities’ Responsibility to Society” presents six questions each society should pose itself with respect to its universities:

How is the “community” to which the university is answerable conceived? What is the role of central government in controlling or steering the university? What is the place of Academia in the Nation? Is the University an institution for stability or change? What purpose does the knowledge transmitted and generated by the University play in society’s development? Should society – through government – determine the type of knowledge which should have priority in the University? (Neave, 2000, p. 4).

These questions were central to the Humboldtian reforms of the Prussian universities as discussed below, but also to the French reforms of universities at roughly the same time (giving rise to the “Napoleonic” model of the institution), as well as to the evolution of both British and American universities. They are still relevant today.

Today, in contrast to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the German idea of the university was born, the community to which universities are answerable does not have to be the nation or the nation-state anymore; increasingly, it may be the region or the local community – or the globe (for major world-class universities). National literature, national history and civic education conceived within a national framework are no longer at the center of the university; the university seems increasingly answerable to the community of its stakeholders: students, parents, employers’ associations, the region, and the economy more generally. The role of central governments in controlling the university, and in subsidizing its operations (as the share of universities’ income), is decreasing in most OECD countries. The place of academia in the nation is changing: from a provider of national glue to hold society and its citizens together – to a provider of the skills and competences necessary to flourish in emergent knowledge-based societies; as well as from the pursuit of knowledge mostly for its own sake – to the pursuit of constantly redefined and mostly “useful” knowledge. Instead of fostering national identity, the university becomes an increasingly important part of (global) production processes. The university today is conceived of as an institution designed for change rather than for stability; its links with industry are getting closer and much more natural than in the past, and research funds are increasingly with “strings-attached”. Knowledge produced is increasingly “useful” to the regional and national economic development, while what counts as useful is having to be renegotiated with research-funding agencies.

Knowledge produced and transmitted by the university no longer serves to maintain national ideals and inculcate a national consciousness; it is increasingly technical knowledge which is independent from the national, linguistic and ideological context in which it was produced. Finally, society through its government agencies is increasingly influencing academic priorities through state funding mechanisms and research areas are being prioritized by the market and corporate funding. This is a fundamental reformulation of the German philosophical ideas of the university as presented below.

## **2. The modern university, the nation-state, and “retrospective constructions”**

There are certainly several parallel readings of the historical coincidence which caused German Idealist and Romantic philosophers to engage in conceptualizing the new research-centered university (known as the “Humboldtian” university), and certainly some of them may be what was called a “retrospective construction” (Rothblatt & Wittrock, 1993, p. 117). But the historical, sociological and philosophical narrative of the coterminous birth of the modern institution of the university and the emergence of the nation-state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems both convincing and interesting. Assuming the narrative gets the picture right, the state during a large part of this century wanted the university to serve the dual purpose of national knowledge production and the strengthening of national loyalties. As Björn Wittrock argues in his essay “The Modern University: The Three Transformations”, the process of the emergence of the modern university “is intimately linked” to the process of the rise of the modern nation-state” (Wittrock, 1993, p. 305).

I am attributing here the development of the modern university in the form known to us as the “Humboldtian” university to the needs of the rising nation-state (and I will argue along the lines sketched out by Björn Wittrock (1993), Gerard Delanty (2001), Bill Readings (1996), Andy Green (1997), Jürgen Enders (2004) and others). To recall Wittrock’s memorable expression, “universities form part and parcel of the very same process which manifests itself in the emergence of an industrial economic order and the nation state as the most typical and most important form of political organisation”

(Wittrock, 1993, p. 305). There is certainly no single narrative (or “history”) of the rise (and possibly fall?) of the modern (especially “Humboldtian”) university; there are competing narratives based on competing historical, political, cultural, social and economic accounts. Here I am presenting one of them.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. The three main principles of the Humboldtian university

Historically speaking, the status of the institution of the university in Germany at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the new (modern) idea of the university was about to be born, was very questionable and it was German philosophy that helped resurrect the very notion of a university. At that time in Europe, the institution had been “more threatened than perhaps at any time before or afterwards” (Wittrock, 1993, p. 314).<sup>2</sup> There are three main principles of the modern university to be found in the founding fathers of the University of Berlin. The first principle is the unity of research and teaching (*die Einheit von Forschung und Lehre*); the second is the protection of academic freedom: the freedom to teach (*Lehrfreiheit*) and the freedom to learn (*Lernfreiheit*);<sup>3</sup> and the third is the central importance of the faculty of philosophy (the faculty of Arts and Sciences in modern terminology) (see Fallon, 1980, p. 28ff.; Röhrs, 1995, p. 24ff.). The three principles are developed, to varying degrees, in Schelling, Fichte, Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>4</sup> Together, the three principles have guided the modern institution of the university through the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed presentation, see my book *The University and the State. A Study into Global Transformations* (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 2006, 424 pp.). See also Kwiek 2000, 2004a and 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Bahti in his “Histories of the University: Kant and Humboldt” reminds that the eighteenth century had been a “lowpoint for German universities: unruly students, dropping enrollments, little apparent correlation between subjects taught and post-university positions available, financial marginality etc.” (Bahti, 1987, p. 438).

<sup>3</sup> Kazimierz Twardowski when receiving his honorary doctorate at the University of Poznan in 1932 argued that “the opportunity to perform the task specific to the University is conditioned by its *absolute spiritual independence*. ... scientific research can develop and bring its work to fruition only if it is completely free and not threatened in any manner” (Twardowski, 1997, pp. 11–12).

<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Newman’s idea of the university did not refer to the German notions of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*. As Sheldon Rothblatt remarked about Newman’s university, “since teaching was the function of a university, it was important to teach the right things” (Rothblatt, 1997, p. 14).

century. To what extent these principles are being questioned today, by whom and in what segments of the diversified systems of higher education is a different issue. Very briefly, and without the necessary nuancing of the answer, the principle of the unity of teaching and research still guides the functioning of our universities, but not so much our higher education sector in general;<sup>5</sup> academic freedom is under severe attack in both developed and developing countries, from a variety of directions, including threats from the state and business in selected areas; and the third principle, the centrality of philosophy to the functioning of the university, seems to be the most endangered, if not already abandoned, both in theory and in practice.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. The nationalization of European universities: serving the nation**

The crucial step in the historical development of European universities is what Guy Neave termed the process of their *nationalization* – bringing the university formally into the public domain as a *national* responsibility. With the rise of the nation-state, the university was set at the apex of institutions defining national identity: “the forging of the nation-state went hand in hand with the incorporation of academia into the ranks of state service, thereby placing upon it the implicit obligation of service to the *national* community” (Neave, 2001, p. 26). The emergence of the Prussian

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<sup>5</sup> It was Ortega y Gasset who argued strongly against the unity of teaching and research and questioned the Humboldtian unity of the two activities; he claimed that “the teaching of the professions and the search for truth *must* be separated” (Gasset, 1944, pp. 76–77).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel on the formation of the German idea of the university seems minimal: two papers are mentioned in this context by commentators, one about teaching philosophy in gymnasia of 1812, and the other about teaching philosophy in universities of 1816 (“Über den Vortrag der Philosophie auf Gymnasium” and “Über den Vortrag der Philosophie auf Universitäten”, see Ferry et al., 1979). None of the major English books on the idea refer to Hegel in this context more than in passing (see Fallon, 1980; Röhrs, 1995 or, most recently, a monumental *Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* edited by Rüegg, 2004). Consequently, in this paper, we do not refer to Hegel, or to Immanuel Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties*, with its strong emphasis on the superiority of the faculty of philosophy *vis-à-vis* other faculties. For fundamental differences between Kant and Wilhelm von Humboldt in viewing the university, see Bahti, 1987 and especially Readings, 1996, for whom Kant’s university is not yet the modern (i.e. nation-state oriented) university.

and French (Napoleonic) models of the university did not only mean the shift from revealed knowledge – characteristic of Medieval (and early modern) universities – to verifiable scientific knowledge. The Humboldtian reforms and their French counterparts were also a crucial step in the definition of the nation-state itself (Neave, 2000, p. 5).

The emergence of the universities in Berlin (expressly directed against the Napoleonic model, see Rüegg, 2004, p. 47 ff.) and in Paris marked the termination of the long process for the incorporation of the university to the state (Neave, 2001, p. 25). The process of the “nationalization” of the university settled the issue of what the role and responsibilities of the modern institution in society should be. The emergent nation-state defined the social place of the emergent modern university and determined its social responsibilities. The nation-state determined the community to which the university would be answerable: it was going to be the *national* community, the nation. At the same time, though, as Neave stresses, there was the other obligation of the institution: the second duty, conceived of under the influence of German Idealists in the form of the *pursuit of truth*. It was disinterested scholarship driven by the curiosity of free individuals, scholars searching for truth.<sup>7</sup>

### 5. The national aspect of the German *Bildung*

While Neave in his historical papers stresses that aspect of the German Idealists’ interpretation of the university in which “culture, science and learning existed *over and above the state*” and in which “the responsibility of the university was to act as the highest expression of *cultural* unity” (Neave, 2001, p. 25, emphases mine), I would like to stress the *national* aspect of *Bildung* and the role of the university as conceived by the German thinkers in the production of *national* consciousness, providing the national glue to keep citizens together, fostering national loyalty and supporting not only the nationhood in *cultural* terms but also the nation-state in *political* terms.

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<sup>7</sup> Or as Kazimierz Twardowski, a famous pre-war Polish philosopher, describes an academic in his “The Majesty of the University”: “a university teacher is first of all a servant of objective truth, its representative and herald *vis-à-vis* the young people and society at large” (Twardowski, 1997, pp. 13–14).

Consequently, I would like to weaken the sharp opposition presented by Neave between the Napoleonic model of the university and the *political* unity of the nation on the one hand, and the German model of the university and the *cultural* unity of the nation on the other hand. The opposition is clearly there, but the *political* aspect of the Humboldtian reforms to the German university, fully complementary to the ideal of the “pursuit of truth”, should be emphasized as well. The political motif was present in German thinking about the idea of the university from Kant to Humboldt and reached perhaps its full-blown shape in Martin Heidegger’s *Rectorial Address* pronounced at Freiburg in 1933 and in his attempts to use the modern university and his philosophy-inspired reforms of it directly for the political purposes of the new Germany.

I am stressing here the combination of cultural and political motifs in their formulations of the idea of the university rather than (following Neave) merely cultural ones; perhaps even the political *cum* cultural motif. The classical German notion of *Bildung* from that period, and from the writings of these philosophers, to a varying degree depending on the exact historical moment and the given author, is very strongly politicized. It refers to the cultivation of the self and of the individual but also to the cultivation of the individual *as a nation-state citizen*. I am in agreement here with the late Bill Readings who emphasizes in his *The University in Ruins* that in German Idealists,

under the rubric of culture [i.e. *Bildung* - MK], the University is assigned the dual task of research and teaching, respectively the production and inculcation of national self-knowledge. As such, it becomes the institution charged with watching over the spiritual life of the people of the rational state, reconciling ethnic tradition and statist rationality (Readings, 1996, p. 15).

Consequently, I do not see the distinction between what was the political unity of the nation and what was the cultural unity of the nation (in their relationship to the institution of the university) as sharply as Neave does and I want to soften this distinction considerably. In my view, the *national* component in the German idea of the university, and the role assigned to the German nation in the writings of German philosophers accompanying the emergence of the University of Berlin, were considerable. I will discuss this component in more detail later in the paper.

## 6. The pursuit of truth vs. public responsibilities of the modern university

The tension between “the pursuit of truth” and “public responsibility” (be it cultural or political dimensions) in the evolution of the modern university, Neave stresses, has been very clear in German writings on *Academia*. There is a clear tension between thinking about science and the community of scholars and students, truth and universality on the one hand, and the national consciousness, nationhood, the state and academic responsibilities to them on the other. The immediate reason to rethink the institution of the university was *political*, though (the defeat by the French on the battlefield). It was clearly Fichte who was the most nation-oriented in his ideas of the university, and it is no accident that it was Fichte’s thinking that influenced Heidegger’s ideas on the university most, slightly more than a hundred years later.

Increasingly, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, culture in the sense of *Bildung* became mixed with political motivations and aspirations, focused around the notion of the German national state. It is interesting to note that in a global age, *both* motifs have been put under enormous pressure. Forging national identity, serving as a repository of the nation’s historical, scientific or literary achievements, inculcating national consciousness and loyalty to fellow-citizens of the nation-state, do not serve as the rationale for the existence of the institution of the university any more; at the same time, the disinterested pursuit of truth by curiosity-driven scholars in the traditional sense of the term is no longer accepted as a *raison d’être* for the institution either. Consequently, no matter whether we focus more on the cultural unity of the nation or on the political unity of the nation, or more on the search for truth through disinterested, curiosity-driven research as the two distinct driving forces behind the development of the modern university, both motifs are dead and gone in post-national and global conditions. Neither serving truth, nor serving the nation (and the nation-state) seem to be the guiding principles for the functioning of the institution today, and neither of them are even mentioned in current debates about the future of the university on a global or European level.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is sufficient to read the recent communications of the European Commission about the role of the university and research and development activities in knowledge-based societies or World Bank’s and OECD’s views on the future role of the university which are underpinning reforms of higher education in most transition and



## 7. The university and the state: a modern pact

The modern university holds an “affirmative” relationship with the state: as Gerard Delanty comments on the relationship in his *Challenging Knowledge. The University in the Knowledge Society*,

The university needs the state to guarantee its autonomy. In return for this autonomy the university will provide the state with a moral and spiritual basis, becoming in effect a substitute for the Church (Delanty, 2001, p. 33).

Delanty states that although universities were always important sites of intellectual resistance to power, the institution was primarily designed to “serve the national state with technically useful knowledge and the preservation and reproduction of national cultural traditions” (Delanty, 2001, p. 2). Does the state need useful knowledge and national cultural traditions today as much as it used to in the era of competing nation-states, one may wonder? How do the two dimensions relate to the contemporary institution of the state in a globalizing era? The answer is complicated, and needs to be nuanced (see Kwiek, 2005). Traditionally, the knowledge in question was knowledge for the state apparatus and its personnel: state officials and administrators, engineers, teachers, lawyers etc. Cultural traditions (in Germany embodied in the idea of *Bildung*), on the other hand, were crucial for the development of emergent nation-states. Both basic assumptions are being questioned today though. Delanty goes on to argue that “the university formed a *pact with the state*: in return for autonomy it would furnish the state with its cognitive requirements. The great social movements of modernity ... had little to do with the ivory tower of the academy and its posture of splendid isolation” (Delanty, 2001, p. 2, emphasis mine). But this historical pact is slowly beginning to unravel today, as the state is no longer “the sole guardian of knowledge production” (Delanty, 2001, p. 4). Today the state is increasingly retreating from being the *provider* to merely being *regulator* and is no longer the sole funding body for knowledge production. This development fundamentally alters the historical pact between knowledge and the state worked out in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when state control over the production of knowledge was institutionalized in the university (Delanty, 2001, p. 103).

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developing countries today, see European Commission, 2003, 2005, 2006; World Bank, 2002; OECD, 1998.

Jaspers in his account of the relationships between the university and the state follows closely the classical German ideal of the university but is much more realistic. Habermas considers both the German Idealists' and Jaspers' views of the social, political, and cultural role of the university to be an oversimplification (Habermas, 1989, p. 108). The enthusiasm of his predecessors is gone in Jaspers though; the belief in the healing social and political powers of the university, most vividly expressed in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1808 ("it is education alone that can save us from all the ills that oppress us"), is gone too. In Jaspers, the university and the state are closely interrelated but the influence of the state on the university is overriding; there are no traces of dreams (Platonic in origin) of philosophers-kings, scholars who would be leading the leaders of the nation, that were still present in his predecessors.

### **8. The renewal of the university vs. the regeneration of the nation**

While his classical German predecessors referred largely to the *philosophical idea* of the university, Jaspers, especially in defining the relations of the university with the state, is much more a student of contemporary political sciences than of the German philosophical classics. Jaspers' predecessors emphatically believed in the regeneration of the German *nation* through the new idea of the university; Jaspers, by contrast, believed merely in the renewal of the *university* on the basis of its classical idea. The scope of their intent is radically different: the former meant huge social transformations in which the university, and education more generally, was supposed to be a leading force; the latter, in turn, wanted to transform the university itself, hardly ever expressing the desire to transform the social or political world around him, be it the German nation or humanity, by the medium of the institution. In Jaspers' account though, the worldly embodiments of the university still bear a direct relation to its ideal, to an almost Platonic Idea of the university; it was inconceivable to Jaspers that the worldly embodiments of the university could diverge from the ideal too far and consequently could begin to lose contact with the idea of the university. Habermas in this context criticized both Jaspers and his predecessors.

Jaspers, at least declaratively, maintains the role of philosophy at the university accorded to it by German Idealists and Romantics.<sup>9</sup> He presents philosophy as a guardian of both culture and the idea of the university. The philosophical faculty, that is more or less the faculty of arts and sciences, enjoys a “unique position” at the university; from the viewpoint of research, it “by itself comprises the whole university” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 87), and without the uniqueness and unity of the philosophical faculty, the university becomes “an aggregate, an intellectual department store” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 88). Certainly his belief in the emancipatory and culture-producing powers of philosophy is much smaller than originally presented by his predecessors, but nevertheless it is still relatively strong. The attitude of his predecessors is vividly described by Habermas, with Fichte as an example, for whom the university was “the birthplace of an emancipated society of the future” (Habermas, 1989, p. 111).

## 9. Knowledge for its own sake and Wilhelm von Humboldt

In Humboldt’s “Proposal for the Establishment of the University of Berlin”, the timing was not favorable for founding a university, considering “recent unfortunate events”, and the plan proposed by the Education Section of the Ministry should perhaps be based on an assumption of “calmer and happier times” (Humboldt, 1989, p. 233). The city of Berlin is the only location the King and the Prussian government should think of: the institution “cannot be located in any other place than next to the seat of the government” (Humboldt, 1989, p. 235). The new institution should be called the “university” and should “include everything that the notion of the university carries with it” (Humboldt, 1989, p. 235). Finally, and bringing in the economic dimension, the fundamental task of the university administration will always be to lead to a situation in which “the whole of education will no longer be a burden on the

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<sup>9</sup> The uniqueness of the modern German university was its reliance on philosophy; philosophy was to guarantee “the universality and unity of the university” (Liedman, 1993, p. 82). As Sheldon Rothblatt comments in his *The Modern University and Its Discontents*, “the disciplinary crown of the German idea of a university was philosophy (and philology, as incorporated into the faculty organizational structure of the Continental university). Philosophy was the means for unifying the disciplines” (Rothblatt, 1997, p. 22).

coffers of His Majesty” (Humboldt, 1989, p. 237).<sup>10</sup> In the text “On Internal and External Organization of Higher Scientific Establishments in Berlin” it is exactly at the university that “everything that is occurring in the spiritual culture of a nation comes together” (Humboldt, 1979, p. 321). Universities are destined to “develop science and scholarship in the deepest and widest sense of the terms and transmit it not as an intention but as material intentionally prepared for internal and moral education” (Humboldt, 1979, p. 321). Science is a never-fully-solved problem and therefore it is still in progress; consequently, one can think of the notion of research as suggested by Humboldt as a never-ending story. As Humboldt formulates the point,

In the internal organization of higher scientific establishments, everything is based on the principle that science should be treated as something not discovered and something that can never be fully discovered and as such science should be permanently sought (Humboldt, 1979, p. 323).

Following the emergence of research as a core activity, Humboldt suggests a new relationship between the professor and the student (still retained in Jaspers’ idea of the university a century and a half later): “the former is not destined for the latter but both exist for science” (Humboldt, 1979, p. 322). The fundamental principle of the new university becomes “knowledge for its own sake”: with an optimistic conclusion that “when the principle of knowledge for its own sake becomes dominant, there will be no need to worry about anything else” (Humboldt, 1979, p. 324). What the university of Berlin was supposed to provide was the “moral education of the nation” and its “spiritual and moral formation” (Humboldt, 1979, p. 321). The role of the state is, first, to make higher education institutions function smoothly and, second, make sure that they do not cease operation, keeping a clear and constant division of labor between them and high schools and keeping in mind that the state “rather disturbs when it intrudes” in the functioning of higher education institutions (Humboldt, 1979, p. 322). The main role of the state, apart from providing funding, is to make the right selection of men for university posts and to give them full freedom to act (Humboldt, 1979, p. 324). Humboldt does not seem to be

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<sup>10</sup> Looking at university finances from a historical perspective: “A constant element of the history of the universities, and certainly in the Middle Ages and early modern times, is the lack of financial resources. ... there is no doubt that many institutions were hardly able to function decently, and always lived, as it were, below the breadline” (de Ridder-Symoens, 1996, pp. 183-184).

concerned with the details of the functioning of the institution. He links the university to the state; as Fallon observes, there is little evidence that Humboldt ever seriously questioned that the state had a “natural responsibility to provide education for the people on all levels, including a sound university” (Fallon, 1980, pp. 21–22).

### 10. *Bildung*, the individual, and the state

David Sorkin in his ground-breaking paper about Humboldt and the theory and practice of *Bildung* highlights the political dimension of the plans to establish the University of Berlin:

With the Prussian state at the mercy of Napoleon, new weapons had to be forged to continue the struggle. Humboldt advocated a decisive commitment to science and learning which would win back for Prussia some of her lost prestige at home and abroad (Sorkin, 1983, p. 65).

Humboldt’s variant of the conception of self-formation (*Bildung*) developed in 1809–1810 has been considered the doctrine that “legitimized the alliance of the intelligentsia and the state through the university” (Sorkin, 1983, p. 56).<sup>11</sup> In *Limits of State Action* (1791–92), Humboldt formulated the first condition for *Bildung*: the freedom of the individual. But, according to Sorkin’s analysis, he had not been able until 1809–1810 to find a way to satisfy the second condition for self-formation: the social bonds enabling the free interchange of individuals. This resolution depended upon Humboldt’s new conception of the nation (Sorkin, 1983, p. 61). The resolution of the theoretical problem lay in a single practical move: “his reform of the Prussian educational system aspired to return control of education to the nation” (Sorkin, 1983, p. 61). The theoretical problem posed in *Limits of State Acton* was solved when Humboldt brought together the discovery of the nation and the reform of educational institutions. The whole concept of *Bildung* had been evolving in the decades preceding the founding of the University of Berlin: since Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, and Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* where the notion was aestheticized from the revival of Hellenic culture onwards. *Bildung*, emerging with neo-humanism, became “Protestant Germany’s

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<sup>11</sup> For a different reading of *Bildung*, depriving it of its civic (not to mention, national) dimension, see Andrew Valls’ paper on “Self-Development and the Liberal State: The Cases of John Stuart Mill and Wilhelm von Humboldt” (Valls, 1999).

secular and social ideal” (Sorkin, 1983, p. 69). It evolved in philosophers, reaching its patriotic and political extreme in Fichte’s famous *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1808. As Wittrock observes, the University of Berlin became an “institutionalized form of *Bildung*” (Wittrock, 1993, p. 317). As Daniel Fallon comments on the issue, “although a liberal on record as a critic of the authoritarian state, Humboldt wedded the University of Berlin in close and unbreakable union to the State of Prussia” (Fallon, 1980, p. 19). This relationship seems to have been paradigmatic for the period marking a historical contract binding the modern state and the modern university.

### **11. The rebirth of the German nation through education (Johann Gottlieb Fichte)?**

I would like to focus now briefly on two works by Johann Gottlieb Fichte: his lectures on “The Vocation of the Scholar” (included in *The Purpose of Higher Education*) and his *Addresses to the German Nation*. Fichte advocated a much more radical organization of the university, compared to Friedrich Schleiermacher in his *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*. Fichte’s lectures on the vocation of the scholar were given at the University of Jena in 1794 and his *Addresses to the German Nation* were delivered before crowded audiences during the winter of 1807–1808. He elaborated a detailed plan for the proposed university in Berlin and was appointed its professor and then Rector. In Fichte, the political and social role of the university, and that of scholars, was one of the highest among German advocates of university reforms. The vocation of a scholar, clearly a hero of the Hegelian type, is “the supervision of the real progress of humanity in general, and the constant support of this progress” (Fichte, 1988, p. 54). The scholar is “the *teacher* of humanity” and “the *educator* of humanity” (Fichte, 1988, p. 58). Following a long line of thinking in philosophy in which the philosopher himself or herself gives the example (*exemplum*), Fichte states that “we teach not only through words, we also teach, much more intensively, through our example” (Fichte, 1988, p. 59). Consequently, the scholar must be morally “the most outstanding human being of his or her time” and must represent “the highest possible education of the then current age”

(Fichte, 1988, p. 60). Fichte's understanding of his own role in history follows the same lines when he states about himself that

my labors, too, will influence the course of future generations, the world history of nations that is to come. I am called upon to give testimony of the truth. ... I am a Priest of Truth; I am at her service. I have committed myself to act on her behalf, to take risks for her, and to suffer (Fichte, 1988, p. 60).

## 12. Giving birth to a new world

Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* were a clear appeal for a spiritual regeneration of the German people through education following the defeat at Jena in 1806. Trying to reconcile the primacy of the moral individual with the primacy of the state, Fichte constructed a platonic educational structure that transformed *Bildung* into mere pedagogy with a pre-determined "patriotic content". Fichte's ideas were not those of an isolated individual: "he represented the theoretical tip of an iceberg, a middle-class movement for national education" (Sorkin, 1983, p. 70). Napoleon's defeat of Prussia gave the movement a unified purpose: the defeat of the French (Fichte wanted education to "wipe from our memory the shame that has been done to the German name before our eyes", Fichte, 1979a, p. 194). Consequently, national education became political and patriotic education. *Bildung* itself was subordinated to patriotism and political training: *Bildung* in Fichte's hands was a "political instrument with a determinate content and preordained goal" (Sorkin, 1983, p. 71). His views need to be discussed as standing in opposition to those of Humboldt who rejected the movement for national political education. As a result of his opposition to the Fichtean movement for national education, Humboldt, as already mentioned, suppressed the civic conception of *Bildung* to avoid similarities with the *Bildung* of national political education.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fichte's views on the question of state intervention in education evolved dramatically from earlier works such as "The Vocation of the Scholar" (1790s) through *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807/8) to their final form in his political theory of *Die Staatslehre* (1813). This evolution, in the most general terms, went from wishing the state to keep away from education as much as possible, confining the state's action in education to the narrowest limits, to a resolution of the problem of creating the perfect state by educating perfect men through national and state education.

The remark that the “dawn of the new world is already past its breaking” (Fichte, 1979a, p. 18) is no different from what F.W.J. Schelling says in his *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums* of 1803 (translated into English as *On University Studies*):

An epoch such as our own is surely bound to give birth to a new world. Those who do not actively contribute to its emergence will inevitably be forgotten. The noble task of shaping the future devolves upon the fresh, unspoiled energies of youth (Schelling, 1966, pp. 7–8).

The rhetoric of newness, uniqueness, and the feeling of a new world approaching, is very powerful in Fichte’s work (and it was no accident that in 1933 in his *Rektoratsrede* Martin Heidegger referred clearly to the Fichte from *Addresses*,<sup>13</sup> see Sluga 1993). The role Fichte ascribes to education, and especially to higher education, is crucial; if German states are not to be completely destroyed from the surface of the world, another “place of refuge” must be found – and this is exactly the role of education. Not surprisingly, education turns out to be the only possible means of “saving German independence” and it is education alone that can save the Germans “from the barbarism and relapse into savagery that is otherwise bound to overwhelm us” (Fichte, 1979, pp. 154, 195). The Germans owed their unique position to the fact that they could understand Fichte’s philosophy. Only the acceptance of true philosophy – i.e. of Fichte’s philosophy – could save the nation, if not the European continent, from the flood of barbarity. Germans as people owe their identity to the uniqueness of the German language; and it is the uniqueness of the German language that Fichte invokes to prove the uniqueness of the people who speak it, which, as one commentator put it, is a “strangely sublime tautology” (Martyn, 1997, p. 311).

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<sup>13</sup> Thinking of Fichte and Heidegger: it was Hans Sluga in his excellent book about Martin Heidegger’s involvement in Nazi politics in 1933 (*Heidegger’s Crisis. Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*, 1993) who asked why Heidegger turned to Fichte in his *Rektoratsrede*: “Fichte saw himself as living at a moment of historical decision, at a unique turning point in human history” (Sluga, 1993, p. 30). As he argues, “Heidegger’s use of the themes of crisis, nation, leadership, and order derived, in fact, directly from Fichte’s *Addresses*. It was Fichte who put this fourfold thematic together and made it its own bridge for crossing from philosophical speculation to political engagement” (Sluga, 1993, p. 32). In one of my books I have devoted a chapter to Heidegger and the German university in the context of French and American discussions (known as *l’affaire Heidegger*) (Kwiek, 1998, pp. 172–233).



What he meant in his *Addresses*, written in an antiquarian, Lutheran style (on their style, see Martyn 1997), was the “fundamental reconstruction of the nation” through new education and “the salvation of the German nation”, as well as a “complete regeneration of the human race” (Fichte 1979a: 17, 156). The remedy for the “preservation” of the German nation is an absolutely new system of German national education, education for manhood (but also for nationhood) that is a “reliable and deliberate art” (Fichte, 1979, p. 22). He believed strongly in the emancipatory power of philosophy, especially his own philosophy, and the power of national education. He presented his *practical* ideas about the future university in his “Deducirter Plan einer zu Berlin zu errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt”, written in 1807 (see Fichte, 1979b). Humboldt’s task was to make a choice between the radical proposal of a new organization for higher learning proposed by Fichte and Schleiermacher’s more traditional project for a university’s organization presented in *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*. Humboldt’s choice clearly favored Schleiermacher over Fichte, even though it was Fichte who became the first rector of the University of Berlin.

### **13. The state, the university, and academic freedom (Friedrich Schleiermacher)**

The committee drafting the provisional statutes for the University of Berlin had already asked Schleiermacher in 1808 to prepare the final drafts of these statutes and he used his earlier essay *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense* for this purpose. The final permanent statutes were only approved in 1817. As Daniel Fallon observed in 1980, Schleiermacher’s model university structure became the “basic organizational pattern for all German universities up to the present time. This form of administrative organization ... leaves a substantial controlling share of academic administration exclusively to the state through its Ministry of Culture” (Fallon, 1980, p. 36). Schleiermacher held strong views about science and scholarship as a communal effort; based on his philosophical assumptions about the role of communication in attaining knowledge, and about the role of the state in education and the relationships between the state and the university. He claimed that science “must be a communal effort to which each contributes a

share, so that for its purpose each is dependent on all the rest and can by oneself possess only an isolated fragment and that very incompletely” (Schleiermacher, 1991, p. 2).

Schleiermacher provides one of the clearest pictures of the mutual dependence of the state and the university. The state needs information that is provided by the sciences. Therefore the state “takes on institutions which it would have had to establish if they were not already to be found; ... However, the state works only for itself, historically it is chiefly self-seeking through and through; thus it tends not to offer support to science except on its own terms, within its own boundaries” (Schleiermacher, 1991, p. 6). To describe the nature of the relationships between the state and the university, he refers to the Platonic tradition of philosophers-kings from *Republic* (Schleiermacher was the translator of the entire corpus of Plato into German):

The state customarily has quite a different view from that of scholars regarding the way scientific institutions must be ordered and led, since scholars enter into closer association for the sake of science itself. Certainly the two aspects would be in accord if the state truly wanted to give currency, in the full sense, to the demands of a wise old head: if not to the first demand that those who know shall govern, then to the second that those who govern shall know (Schleiermacher, 1991, p. 8).

Philosophical instruction is the basis of all that is to be carried on at the university. But transcendental philosophy is not enough: “real” knowledge is needed, and therefore both more advanced information and other information that was not included in the school curricula is provided at the university. As a result, the university is both a “post-school” and a “pre-academia”. But as in other German founding fathers of the university, “the scientific spirit is awakened by philosophical instruction” (Schleiermacher, 1991, p. 19). For the purposes of awakening the scientific spirit in young people formal speculation alone will not suffice but must be embedded in “‘real’ knowing”. The university “has to embrace all knowing” and “must express its natural internal relation to knowing as a whole” (Schleiermacher, 1991, p. 24).

The notion of academic freedom is as strong in Schleiermacher as in other thinkers discussed here. The complementary figures of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*, freedom to teach and freedom to learn, can be traced in all of them, providing the basis for the modern idea of the university. These concepts were clearly stated for the first time at the time of the founding of the University of Halle in 1694. Humboldt’s contribution was to make clear that the protection of the

university was essential, even if viewed in terms of the interests of the state (Fallon, 1980, p. 29).

#### **14. The (foundational) idea of the university vs. its embodiments (the exposition of the Jaspers/Habermas controversy)**

The major twentieth-century controversy about the German idea of the university on German grounds discussed in this paper was between Karl Jaspers and Jürgen Habermas. Let us, before reaching tentative conclusions, focus on it briefly. Jaspers in his classic book on *The Idea of the University* returned to the Humboldtian notion of the university, while Habermas, in such texts as “The University in a Democracy: Democratization of the University” (a lecture given at the Free University of Berlin in 1967 which reopened the German debate on the social role of the institution) and “The Idea of the University: Learning Processes” (a lecture given in Heidelberg in 1986 and included in *The New Conservatism*) stood more in the Kantian tradition of the university as a site of critique (Delanty, 2001, p. 64). Jaspers’ book referred to the basic assumption originating from the German founding fathers of the university that the institution of the university rests on a *foundational idea*. Habermas’ main line of criticism is that “organizations no longer embody ideas” (Habermas, 1989, p. 102). Jaspers and Habermas stand on two opposite sides; paradoxically, Habermas, in his discussion of the university, is much closer to the postmodern position of Jean-François Lyotard (in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* of 1979) than to the classical German tradition in viewing the institution (see Lyotard, 1984, pp. 31–37).

Jaspers believes in the post-war (first, and then second world war) renewal of the university on the basis of its *idea* – he believes in preserving the German university through a rebirth of its foundational “idea”. As Habermas comments on this line of thinking, its “premises derive from the implicit sociology of German Idealism. Institutions are forms of objective spirit. An institution remains capable of functioning only as long as it embodies in living form the idea inherent in it” (Habermas, 1989, p. 101). Indeed, in Jaspers, there is a strong Platonic dualism between the idea and its embodiment, the essence of the university and its earthly occurrence, the idea of the institution of the university and its living form. In thinking about what the university *is*, it is impossible to

forget what it *should* be. Consequently, students and professors ought to “assimilate the idea of the university” and be “permeated by the idea of the university as part of a way of life” (Jaspers, 1959, pp. 75, 68). Both students and professors become guardians of the idea of the university, checking whether the institution is performing according to its ideal, serving the purposes it was meant to serve, and functioning properly i.e. in the way inherently present in its very idea.

The institution may be successful in living up to the idea, or it may fail. The idea can never be “perfectly” realized, however. Therefore a permanent state of tension exists at the university between the idea and the reality (Jaspers, 1959, p. 70). The quality of the university is always measurable against its ideal and “the idea becomes concrete in the institution” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 70). The university is an institution “uniting people professionally dedicated to the quest and transmission of truth in scientific terms” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 3). The new concepts from Jasper’s definition referred to above are the following: “uniting people” for the sake of science (students and professors working together, rather than professors working merely for students), “professionally dedicated” staff (rather than dedicated in an “amateurish” way characteristic of the institutions of the Enlightenment), “the quest and transmission” of truth (rather than merely transmission to students, i.e. instruction becomes accompanied by research) and its pursuit “in scientific terms” (originally referred to the German ideal of *Wissenschaft*). So almost all the components of this definition contrast the new concept of the university with the old one. The scholar, in a Platonic manner in which truth, beauty and goodness are united, becomes a special sort of person: he must “dedicate himself to truth as a human being, not just a specialist”, so what is required of him is the “serious commitment of the whole man” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 3). Also the aim of instruction and research is the “formation of the whole man”, “education in the broadest sense of the term” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 3). Thus the German ideal of *Bildung*, which lay at the foundation of the projects for the university of Berlin and was fundamental to German thinkers of the time, retains its force perhaps for the last time so powerfully in Jaspers’ philosophy.

## 15. Conclusions

In discussing current and future missions and roles of the institution of the university today, it can be useful to revisit its foundational (modern) German idea. In many places, for a variety of internal and external reasons, what we call the “Humboldtian” tradition of the university has been forgotten in practice for a long time. The university is a specific, historically-rooted institution, proud of its origins and its traditions. In thinking about its future it can be constructive to reflect on the evident current tensions between traditional modern expectations of the university (on the part of both society and the state), and the new expectations intensified by the emergence of knowledge-based societies and market-driven economies. From the perspective of the tensions between old and new tasks of the university, looking back at the turning point in its history could turn out to have more than a historical dimension. It might happen that we may need to look for patterns of how to reformulate the roles of the institution (for both internal and external reasons – the evolution of the university and the evolution of the societies and economies it is serving), and the German philosophy of the period could teach us interesting lessons. We know the odyssey of the modern university (in its “Humboldtian” version): the current new ideas about social missions, cultural tasks and economic and political roles of the university (especially as being elaborated by the European Commission, OECD, UNESCO or the World Bank) are increasingly distant from their modern “Humboldtian” forms discussed in this paper. While discussing rapidly transforming European universities, and trying to answer the basic questions societies have always been asking about them, let us not forget about the modern story of changing relationships between the university and the state which had started back 200 years ago, and about lessons it could teach us today.

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