

Practices, norms and ethos of civil society within the university¹

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From its inception, the university has been a prototype and model of a future civil society. To link these two seemingly unrelated phenomena, it is necessary to recall several essential features of medieval universities:

1. **University autonomy.** Universities were one of the medieval city corporations, along with feudal authorities, craftsmen's workshops, merchants' brotherhoods or guilds, Catholic monasteries, and municipality. All these corporations enjoyed autonomy. Universities, among others, had their own charters, self-government, membership, and property. The members of *universitas* (community, corporation) were not subject to city, feudal or ecclesiastical authority, they organised their lives on internal laws, principles and ethos, which were structured as a collective agreement.
2. **The equality of all *universitas* members.** Clearly, professors and students (or scholars) were not equal within the community and had different rights and responsibilities toward each other. The equality of the university community manifested itself in the fact that by entering the university one became a member of the university community, which did not take into account the social status one had before university. Aristocrats and common burghers, sometimes even peasants, got into the university, acquired equal status and differed from each other only according to the rules of the university itself. The university thus abolished class privileges and allowed its members to change the destiny they were born into.
3. **Abilities are paramount.** Advancement in the university community in terms of status, positions and roles was determined only by a person's own ability and hard work. Origin and wealth had little influence on a person's university career.
4. **Club mode of life and critical thinking.** The tradition of scholastic disputes, the public defence of theses and approaches, established from the inception of universities, persisted throughout their existence. This mode of life nurtured principles of freedom of thought, opportunities for reflection and criticism of political, social and religious dogma, challenged exclusively in the university setting.

It would be an exaggeration to say that, in their political struggle and activity, actors of the medieval bourgeois movements or the leaders of the modern bourgeois revolutions, as well as the eighteenth-century enlighteners were guided by university ideals, but the focus on values they appropriated through the universities is obvious. For them, the university was a prototype and a model for building a national community that was to be characterised by: 1) autonomy and self-government; 2) equality of citizens regardless of origin; 3) individual's value based on their abilities, and 4) cultivation of critical thinking.

The socio-political movements of the Modern Age which nested civil society had different ideals and goals, as well; we cannot claim that the university was the only prototype. Perhaps it was not even the main one. The enlighteners and revolutionaries were also guided by ancient patterns and examples, by theoretical and conceptual justification. But the university was a reference point they took from experience and life practice, rather than literature or theory. While studying at universities, they could directly gain that experience of criticality, equality and autonomy. In society, they longed to see what they saw at universities. If it was possible to implement all these principles at the university, they could have been put

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into effect at the city and nation levels. But this possibility could only be realised under the right conditions, and chief among them was the condition of education and enlightenment. That's why the first revolutionaries focused on thought and knowledge as the basis for both social change and democratic values, i.e. they were enlighteners. The best representatives and leaders of social and public movements remained enlighteners in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In a sense, the founders of civil society from the eighteenth to the twentieth century were tempered in university communities and transferred their habits, rules and traditions from the university to public life and the principles of building civil and national communities. The exceptions are the figures of the American Revolution and the founders of the American nation. They rather focused on implementing biblical principles. However, they also drew confidence in the possibility of realising these principles from their university experience. In part, the universities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the states of North America provided training for Protestant pastors, and many American revolutionaries were educated at these universities. They were built on principles borrowed from Europe and included characteristics that shaped the prototypes of civil society.

Modern nations (and civil society as an integral part of them) were born, tempered and strengthened in an era commonly referred to as the Modern Age. This time goes back to the eighteenth century, and it is not known whether it ended with so-called postmodernism, or whether postmodernism is a kind of awareness and reflection of modernism. The "modern age" onset can be characterised in different ways, but for our subject matter what's important is the transition from a class-based, traditional society to a modern, somewhat open society². In this context, it is important that open society, on the one hand, is based on the existence of civil society as a special form of citizens' relations and attitudes towards each other, the state and the country. On the other hand, "open society" rests upon the existence of universities as a form of constant reproduction of basic conditions – at least critical thinking and autonomy, which, in turn, are not possible without the equality of community members, regardless of background and priority of personal abilities. Thus, in an open society, the university is no longer so much a prototype or a place of experiencing coexistence based on equality, but a necessary factor whose function is to ensure openness. According to Karl Popper's concept of an open society, it is critical thinking that provides openness. The university is the place where critical thinking is nurtured and cultivated. Thus, the evolution of nations and societies in the Modern Age has made civil society and the university inseparable elements of symbiosis, where civil society cannot be conceived without the university and the university fails without civil society.

One can identify nations and states in which such a symbiosis between the university and civil society seems quite natural, and those can be characterised as "modern countries". These are primarily the countries of the Anglo-Saxon world, but also the Netherlands and the Scandinavian states. When it comes to Germany and France, this classical scheme is somewhat hampered by other social and political conditions, which must be considered separately because of the defeat of revolutionary France in its struggle against the absolutist regimes of Europe and the disintegration of the German nation and its forced unification. But along with the "modern countries" which began their journey in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there are countries and peoples which are "a little behind". They live in a state of **modernisation**, rather than a situation of modernity. These countries and nations have an external example of do's and don'ts. They do not blaze their own trail, they do not set their own goals, they borrow them and seek to copy those patterns of social life which have already been realised.

Within our subject matter, it is important to examine and analyse the role and place of universities in countries that have chosen the path of modernisation. A feature of these countries is that they did not have their old, autochthonous universities. The establishment of universities in these countries is in itself a step

² Popper K. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge, 1945.

in the process of modernisation. In these cases, the scheme does not work, when revolutionaries and leaders simply project to society the habits, rights and traditions to which they have become accustomed in their universities. Here the universities are created following the trajectories and templates of the "modern countries", the Humboldt University is taken as a typical model at least.

The most striking example of these countries on the road to modernisation is Russia, where universities were originally established by the state, remained state-owned and did not enjoy university autonomy. Historical accounts of Russian universities are not always accurate. It is often claimed that although the universities were autocratic, they were created according to Germanic patterns and offered academic freedoms. This statement is very controversial because, since the age of Reformation, freedom of conscience has been the basic freedom, and in the "modern era" foreign universities, freedom of conscience was determined by the fact that both Catholics and Protestants could study together at theological faculties, as well as teachers could be representatives of different denominations. Russian universities did not have theological faculties³. Therefore, the academic freedoms they had were limited. These institutions promoted revolutionary and democratic ideals, but the revolutionaries who graduated from them did not have sufficient knowledge of freedom, civil liberties and personal autonomy. Russian universities produced a very specific social group which was called "the intelligentsia" and characterised by a "European education" opposed to the traditional way of life. Thus, the intellectuals were often called "foreigners in their own country".

The classic example of Russia vividly reflects the essence of modernisation and the difference in relations between universities and civil society. Here, the newly-formed universities have no traditions; they still need to be artificially created and introduced. Thus, universities become not so much a model of civil society for nations on the road to modernisation, but a tool and means of social change. In contrast to the "symbiotic coexistence" of universities and civil society in modern countries, under modernisation, the universities do not act as independent entities or parts of the system, but rather as a means and instrument in the hands of either the state or political and economic elites. They use universities for economic and technical modernisation, usually without setting the task of political change. However, models of classical university life outside the will of elites entail significant features of attitudes and principles directly associated with civil society.

Such universities used for modernisation tend to create a limited university community where principles of freedom are allowed for students, while professors are very similar to government officials and are generally not a separate, let alone autonomous, community. South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s is the most prominent example of such development.

South Korean universities were the only halfway free places in the country ruled by a dictatorship that had embarked on the path of modernisation. Civil society was almost inexistent in South Korea at the time, it was very weak, squeezed into Christian circles, just a small number of journalists and cosmopolitan managers of big companies. But in universities, which enjoyed relative freedom, student communities and an informal youth movement emerged. Students were often dissatisfied with the rules at universities and their teachers. This discontent led to protests in various forms. Protests sometimes spilt in the streets, growing into crowded demonstrations that were dispersed by the authorities. This student unrest attracted the attention of other citizens and provoked political and social concerns and fears. In this way, the artificial students' "civil society" contributed to the development of the wider civil society, nation and political culture in the country.

³ Temporary exceptions were the universities in the annexed lands, which were reconstituted in the old university cities of Dorpat and Vilna and partly retained their traditional structure including theology faculties. But the Imperial University of Vilna was short-lived (1803-1832).

In less explicit forms, the same can be observed in other countries in Asia and Latin America, as well as in Eastern Europe. We saw the role of student movements in the events of 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the 1980s in Poland, the fall of the Berlin Wall in the GDR, and later in Serbia and Croatia, where they became a driving force of civil society formation, community and social change.

Over time, the university community became global, and universities in classical modern countries and countries that went through successful modernisation began to influence each other and have become somewhat similar. Universities around the world began to lose their former autonomy, not necessarily through subordination to the state, but through commercialisation as well. It is no coincidence that the Bologna Process, initiated by four old classical universities, was very quickly subordinated to states. The Process now is in the hands of education ministries, not the universities themselves. These trends lead to the current global crisis of universities and a return to the debate around the idea of the university, rethinking it and looking for new ways to implement it.