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TOWARDS PUBLIC DEBATES AT UNIVERSITIES, ESPECIALLY BORDERLAND UNIVERSITIES

The “Borderland Ecosystem” session of the “University in the Borderlands – Ideas and Practice” conference was to address several issues, according to the invitation text. Apart from the obvious idea of a university, and in particular, borderlands universities (or cross-border universities), these included the importance of the “smart city” idea (and locating universities in it) and the city-forming role of universities. I will refer to the main points included in the initial invitation, but I will put different emphasis on different issues. I will present here mainly my own opinions (not analyses based on my own research of the academic system), resulting from several decades of participant observation¹. Unfortunately, this participant observation is not perfect. It is difficult for me to rule out the possibility that I failed to notice phenomena that exist in Poland, that are, in fact, important. My text is therefore only a voice in the debate and I hope that this full debate can bring us closer to an accurate understanding of the issues.

I think that at the end of 2022, referring to the essence of medieval European universities, in all their diversity and with all my respect for them, seems only partially sensible. However, we should probably not ignore them entirely. In my opinion, we also cannot forget the significance of the theory and practice of the “Humboldtian universities” of the

¹ I have been researching universities for a very long time. In the mid-1980s, I was interested in the practical elimination of academic autonomy in the Polish People’s Republic (cf. Mucha, 1985). After several decades, I was concerned with the “crisis of European universities”, especially the Polish ones (cf. Mucha, 2010, 2014). Recently, as part of my research observation of the academic system, I have focused not so much on universities, but on the immigration of scholars to higher education institutions in general, and to Polish universities in particular (cf. e.g. Mucha and Łuczaj, 2018).

early 19th century and the neoliberal (“entrepreneurial”) universities of the past few decades, including the “Bologna process” initiated in the last three years of the 20th century². There has been almost constant discussion of the crisis, collapse, ruin, etc. of contemporary universities (or of the entire academic sector) since at least the Enlightenment period. With regard to the recent decades, it is worth remembering the debate on this “crisis” that took place within the International Sociological Association around 2010. During this period, several important books on the topic were also published in Poland. We must also remember that universities in the past (not only in the Middle Ages) hindered the acquisition of new knowledge (they rather focused on transmitting previously accumulated knowledge). And over the last centuries, a significant part of the knowledge growth has taken place and is taking place outside the university systems, for example in scientific societies or industrial, military, etc. laboratories.

I will recall here several phenomena and processes concerning the formation of the “concept of university” in the Western tradition³. The “pre-idea” of the university can be found in the ancient Greece and in the ancient Rome. Scientific schools of those times did not have a permanent organizational structure, and their location (in space) was not very important. What was important was the master and his followers or students. This master was a “lover of truth”, and teaching was his private occupation. Medieval universities appeared at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries, along with the economic development of Europe, manifested primarily in urbanization and technological progress. Wealthy bourgeoisie was interested in education and science. Despite – and alongside – the power of the Church (after the Reformation – Churches), self-governing cities created higher education institutions based on the model of guild corporations. These universities were *universitas doctorum et scholarium*, or communities of people gathered around the search for knowledge and truth, which were at the

² “The neoliberal features of university culture primarily include the commodification of knowledge, the focus on success as a goal (instead of the idea of comprehensive development of the mind), market logic in undertaking research, and a standardized, parameterized system for evaluating academic activity” (Filip, 2019; see also Etzkowitz, 2013).

³ The development of science and advanced education outside the West (Global North) cannot be the subject of these brief considerations, although it is obviously an important field of research.

same time *universitas scientiarum*, or the whole of knowledge, inspired by tradition, discoveries and debates. The Church and cities patronised the universities, sometimes seriously interfering in their activities, but often respecting their autonomy. Subordination to the Church (to the Pope) was particularly characteristic of the early University of Paris. It was primarily a corporation of scholars, co-opting its talented students. This pattern was later adopted in other French universities, as well as in the first English universities (Oxford and Cambridge). The Church had much less real influence on the University of Bologna, whose guild autonomy was stronger and was rather limited by the city authorities. They sometimes came into conflict with the student corporation, but in principle recognized the privileges that the city itself had granted them. (cf. e.g. Antonowicz, 2005: 21-27).

The post-Enlightenment crisis of the idea of the university was solved in many ways. I will focus here only on the ideas of Wilhelm and Alexander Humboldt from the early 19th century, which referred to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and on the implementation of these ideas. They wanted to return to what they considered the sources of the university: the combination of research and teaching, freedom of research, assessment, expression of opinion and teaching. The new university was to be independent of religious institutions and subordinate to the state, the task of which was to finance it, but without violating its internal autonomy. The university was to be a non-profit institution, to be permanently connected with both theory and practical life, and to meet the needs of the state – its culture and economy. These ideas were put into practice (translating the idea of Humboldt university into practice is another matter) in 1809 at the University of Berlin (cf. Antonowicz, 2005: 28-33; Michelsen, 2010).

Certain old ideas, later seemingly lost, still seem important to me. These include the *studium generale*, *universitas*, the community of students and professors, academic freedom, the universities' dealing with general and fundamental cognitive issues important for society, often defined by state authorities, but just as often by other social entities, such as regions, cities, or grassroots social movements. In this sense, I would distinguish universities today from the otherwise extremely important and necessary higher vocational schools, usually representing single fields or bundles of related practical disciplines. I will not deal with them in more detail here. These higher vocational schools, regardless of their name, must of course also respond to such challenges of the 20th and

21st centuries as the dissemination of higher education, the fragmentation and specialization of knowledge, or its commercialization.

Among the aforementioned postulates and implementations of Humboldt's ideas, the most important ones for me are the ideas of combining scientific research with the teaching process⁴, as well as combining university activity with the assessment (critical analysis) of the state of society, culture, or economy of a given place and time. The problem has always been and still is defining who and what is to decide what constitutes the common good in a given place and time. In 1967, Jürgen Habermas gave a lecture at the Free University in Berlin (West) devoted to the connections between universities and democracy. In it, he discussed the tasks that, in his opinion, should be fulfilled by universities. According to him, four of these tasks were the most important. The first is educating qualified professional staff, providing them with specific, "technically useful" knowledge. The second is creating opportunities for students to acquire general knowledge, not necessarily of a specialist nature, but still useful in their later professional careers, throughout life. The third task is transmitting, interpreting, and developing the cultural tradition of society. The fourth task is to shape the political awareness of students, to introduce them to the complex political system of democracy, thanks to which they could become competent and full-fledged citizens of their countries. Unfortunately, the scholar noted, it is mainly the first task that is actually implemented, as a result of which universities are becoming similar to higher vocational schools and even economic organizations. Universities are no longer a seat of reflection of a dynamic society on itself (cf. Habermas, 1971: 1-12). Habermas's concern from fifty years ago is close to my heart.

As I have already mentioned, universities had to be, and of course still have to be, supported by someone. Sponsors have always preferred, and still prefer, supporting their own ideas and interests over subjecting them to critical analysis. But these preferences of state authorities (or religious, economic, or regional institutions) have not generally gone, and rarely go, hand in hand with the conviction that the concept of university is about relying on available empirical knowledge and reason (and developing this knowledge), and not justifying a given system of cultural, political, or economic domination.

⁴ Today, perhaps, these ideas are or will be actually implemented only at the doctoral level.

Meanwhile, the constant task of universities has been, and should continue to be, **to debate** the essence and shape of the reality being studied, but also to evaluate it and reflect on the very criteria for such evaluation. The tension between benevolent advice to the authorities and critical analysis of the dynamics of nature and the state of public affairs seems to be a permanent element of the institution in question. Unfortunately, in my opinion, an attitude of benevolence towards the public authorities who finance universities (often poorly) and their vision of the world dominates the practice of university life, and not only in Poland. The often emphasized need for political neutrality of universities in fact generally means recognizing a given policy of the public authorities as a standard, as something obvious and natural. Supporting the position of the state authorities is supposed to be a manifestation of this neutrality. Critical analyses, or even doubts based on empirical and rational argumentation, are very often considered to be a departure from neutrality, as unjustified interference in politics. Personally, I prefer the concept of an engaged public university (cf. Zespół KP, 2010) – not engaged in any party politics, but in freedom of research and publication of results, dissemination of scientific knowledge, freedom of teaching, and also public scientific debate on socially important topics, important for public authorities but also for citizens and their associations. Socially important topics also refer to the state and dynamics of nature, of course. I would distinguish between public and socially established academic debate and “private” debates, including professors’ conversations, their individual media interviews, and conferences and seminars that are, in practice, closed.

Therefore, it seems to me that an important task of universities is to organize and conduct an appropriately publicized public debate on topics considered crucial in a given place and time, and thus to express opinions on the state of natural, structural, cultural and economic matters. I mean a public debate in which only scientific arguments are allowed, and problems are discussed from different points of view. I mean a debate through which the students become active participants in the process of the university reconsidering its own community – the process of the community’s self-reflection.

Although I am aware that many university scholars play important roles as “public intellectuals” and give interesting and important interviews in the media, I believe that the function I am referring to here is not performed sufficiently in Poland. Debates do take place, of course,

but in my opinion they are usually niche, and their effects are not very well publicized by university organizers. In my opinion, there are few important university debates (and not just public, especially media “debates in general”) on the state of nature in the world, including in Poland (neither general debates, such as on climate dynamics, nor specific ones, such as on the state and dynamics of the Białowieża Forest, or in the second half of 2022 the condition of Polish waters: the sea, rivers and lakes). There are few such public university debates on the state of education in Poland, including primary, secondary and higher education. For example, does the current quantification of achievements and quantitative parameterization, institutionalization of competition between academic institutions not lead to the erosion of the entire Polish higher education system in its practical and ethical dimensions? Does it contribute to the development of knowledge? Were the assumptions and manner of conducting the evaluation of academic institutions (especially in the broadly understood human sciences) not a good reason to organize a series of widely publicized university debates on it? In my opinion, there are few university debates on the state and dynamics of the world economy, including the Polish economy, for example the level of investment, the indebtedness of states, their energy security. Despite the general media activity of many academic lawyers and political scientists, I do not remember university debates on the dynamics of the legal system in Poland, the state authorities’ compliance with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, their respect for the civil rights of Poles and human rights in Poland. The Polish-Belarusian border in Białowieża and the humanitarian crisis that has been going on for over a year (since the end of summer 2021) are a good example of this. There are few university debates on the methods and effects of studying the history of Poland, Europe and the world, for example, “apologetic history” and “critical history”, the people’s history of Poland. Yes, we read about it in the newspapers and there is a clear presence of academics speaking on the subject in various media. The Polish Academy of Sciences has actively joined the analysis of the dynamics of the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland, and its special team publishes very competent reports. University scholars, to mention once again, give interviews on these matters. But have university ethicists, sociologists, demographers organized debates on the record-breaking excess number of deaths on a global scale, published and publicized the recommendations resulting from them?

I will move on to another important issue here. The idea of cross-border universities seems important but also controversial in practice, of course to a great extent dependent not only on the financial capabilities (and symmetry of these capabilities) of the bordering countries, but also on the attitude of the state authorities of each of these countries towards their neighbors and on the specific, usually dynamic, international situation. Such universities could be, for example, an important place for academic debates on international relations – in their social and natural dimensions.

In practice, Poland participates in few such cross-border initiatives. An interesting example is the European University Viadrina (EUV) in Frankfurt (Oder) together with the Collegium Polonicum in Słubice. However, the EUV is not an international, Polish-German university, but an international university of Germany. The location of Viadrina and the Collegium on the borderland is of great importance for the directions of scientific research and teaching carried out there. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, this German university has been losing interest among Polish high school graduates. Other initiatives in the Polish-German borderland (primarily in the Euroregion Neisse) and in the Polish-Czech borderland (mainly the Polish-Czech College of Business and Sports “Collegium Glacense” in Nowa Ruda) took place, but they did not prove successful. The idea of a Polish-Ukrainian university in Lublin was not implemented. The European College of Polish and Ukrainian Universities in this city ended its short-lived activity in the spring of 2011. Its place was taken by the Centre for Eastern Europe, but it entirely belongs to the Polish Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. It is therefore not a cross-border international center (cf. Kurcz and Opiłowska, 2015).

In 2013, the Border Universities Network was established at the initiative of the University of Białystok (UoB). In addition to the UoB, it was joined by universities from Kaunas in Lithuania, Grodno, Baranovichi and Brest in Belarus, Lviv and Ternopil in Ukraine, and Kaliningrad and Voronezh in Russia. Authoritarian practices in Belarus and Russia, then serious international tensions (and finally the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation), made it difficult to actually implement what I consider to be a great, although probably never more precisely specified, idea. Hence, we cannot be surprised that despite the publication in Białystok of the “Studies of the Border Universities Network”, it is difficult to get the impression that the Network is very active (its website

sparingly informs about the activities of this entity), even before the recent presidential elections in Belarus and the current war initiated and waged by the Russian Federation in Ukraine (with the help of Belarus, by the way). The Institute of Sociology of the University of Białystok is, however, very active in organizing international conferences on the European (and in practice not only) border regions. The Branch of the University of Białystok in Vilnius (Faculty of Economics and Informatics) should also be remembered, but it does not create a cross-border university.

Empirical focus on the cross-border region, i.e. located on both sides of a given state border, is and, as I believe, should be an important function of cross-border universities. In my opinion, “dealing with” this region means conducting research, teaching, but also, again, conducting academic debates on cross-border and border regions. Implementing this idea is usually difficult for political reasons, and it might seem easier to implement the idea of such border universities that focus on the specificity of the region on one side of the border. The sense of adding such a function to the standard functions of universities, i.e. research and teaching in the broad sense, is conditioned by the existence of a strong real specificity of a given borderland. In Podlasie, such specificity certainly occurs. It consists of biodiversity in the Białowieża Forest, unseen anywhere else in Poland (both on the Polish and Belarusian sides), as well as the “eternal” ethnic and religious diversity in this area (I will not go into the scope of these last two concepts here), along with specific types of migration.

In 2021, the Terra Diversa Laboratory was established at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Białystok, addressing the issues of the aforementioned, unique in Poland, real regional, historical and current multiculturalism. Incidentally, similar research centers already exist in several Polish universities, where ethnic and religious multiculturalism is incomparably weaker than that in Podlasie and in fact has only immigrant origins. These centers generally have very strong support from cities and university authorities. Let’s go back to the University of Białystok. The academic journal “Pogranicze” has ceased to be published here, although its achievements are significant and, in my opinion, worth continuing. Historical, literary and linguistic (but also natural) research on the borderland has been very advanced at the University of Białystok for years, and Belarusian philology developed here for a very short time and was liquidated. Podlasie seems to me to be an exceptional region for university diagnosis of problems of the social environment,

for public debate on them, for proposing solutions to them, but also for academic shaping of this environment. In my opinion, this is an exceptional region for combining an academic cosmopolitan approach with academic concern for locality. It is not up to me to answer the question of the extent to which this function is implemented in Białystok. As for the public function of the university in the sense presented here, it is worth considering to what extent the University of Białystok was and is still active in such important and controversial matters as work in the Rospuda Valley, logging in Białowieża, practical assimilation of cultural minorities, and most recently the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border.

The invitation to participate in this jubilee debate of the University of Białystok indicates the value of referring to the city-forming role of universities and to the idea of “a smart city”. I will briefly discuss the first issue, which is of course very important and requires a solid empirical and conceptual analysis in specific cases. The often tense relationships between universities and cities began in the Middle Ages and generally meant a broader socialization of these universities, a structure that included them in the life and needs of the city. I do not think that universities were city-forming in a “genetic” sense at that time. Rather, some European cities were “university-forming”, but the establishment of universities certainly contributed to the further dynamics of the cities in which they were located. After all, they attracted students and lecturers from various countries. In this way, they included cities in European networks. This is probably still the case in small European cities that are the seat of important universities, or even universities of lower prestige, but fruitfully involved in international programs, such as Erasmus. Still, for example in Poland, “universities in smaller towns are not only and not simply schools, but also centers of cultural life, spaces for contacts between teachers of secondary schools and universities, centers of joint activities of university and artistic communities” (Czapliński, 2019: 4). Universities are often significant employers and generally create a large market for goods and services. This is the case in many European and American cases. The functioning of universities, once primarily American, in residential campuses, located somewhat outside city centers, is very interesting.

Cross-border universities have a special opportunity to reshape their headquarters by internationalizing them. It seems that this was the chance of Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice two decades ago. This

was also the chance of the aforementioned Nowa Ruda and Lublin. Referring to the host of our conference, I believe that further, in-depth research on the connections between Białystok and its university seems to me very necessary.

I would like to take a moment to explore the concept of “a smart city”, looking for references to university. While the genesis of cities in European and post-European cultures is usually spontaneous, involving the layering of cultural and institutional elements (for example, the emergence and transformation of universities), the idea of “a smart city” is a truly technocratic and modernization-utopian approach (in the analytical, not evaluative sense). The best-known examples of cities aspiring to the title of “a smart city” are Masdar in Abu Dhabi, Dholera and Chandigarh in India, Brasilia in Brazil or Astana in Kazakhstan. Such cities are based on the principles of neoliberal economy and technological (including telecommunications) modernization, on the commercialization of everything possible, on mass monitoring and mass control of people’s behavior. These ideas highlight the “internet of things”, basing research (not only social) on the use of large data sets (“big data”), redefining social and psychological problems in terms of purely technical issues, homogenization and reduction of the specificity and traditions of the given cities and their institutions, blurring collective social agency, disregarding the reflective subjectivity of residents and local governments (cf. Gądecki, 2016). “A smart city” does not seem to me to be a friendly environment for public universities, and I consider the probability of their social success in this environment to be moderate at best. After all, there is not much room here for partnership, community and communalization of decision-making processes and agency, creativity and unconventionality, for serious public debate, social involvement and responsibility, both of scientists and students. In “a smart city”, however, there is room for an elitist, marketized, neoliberal “entrepreneurial university”, as well as for technological research institutes (cf. Etzkowitz, 2013) and their management in a technocratic manner.

In conclusion: I am in favor of universities constantly focusing on basic research and advanced education. I believe that freedom of scientific research combined with the social sensitivity of researchers brings much greater social benefits than the strategic research goals established by politicians and implemented technocratically, although I do not deny the right of sponsors to initiate research that is important to them. I am in favor of greater emphasis on general education in universities than is

currently the case, because it provides greater (than only vocational and specific) flexibility in an increasingly dynamic labor market, and above all gives or strengthens “civic qualifications” and promotes individual development. I believe that universities should serve the development of the economy and culture, as well as the self-awareness of society and individuals. I therefore agree with the view that universities have various social, cultural, global, national and local missions but I consider the production of new knowledge and the constant verification of previous achievements to be their main task.

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