Do Western Universities Have a Mission to Educate?

Claus Offe (Hertie School of Governance)
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As a preface to my remarks, let me just make one thing explicit: I gladly leave it to others to conceptualize the meaning of "Western" culture or civilization. Although there are clearly a great variety of cultures and civilizations in today's world, they can less and less easily be localized on a map of the world. Even when Max Weber formed the highly aggregative concept of "occidental rationalism" about a century ago, he used the concept of the "occident" inconsistently, leaving open whether he meant the North West of Europe, Western Europe, Europe, or Europe plus the United States of America (while a place like Australia, today describing itself as part of "the West", remained entirely outside the scope of his investigations). Today, we might even add parts of East Asia and major parts of Latin America as sites of "Western culture", or as hybrids in which this culture is a major ingredient. Looked at in the opposite, i. e. a disaggregating perspective, current debates on the cultural "essence" of Europe, as it is sometimes passionately invoked in discourses on European integration, have shown that the old continent is in fact made up of numerous cultures (religious, linguistic, ethnic, historical, political) which render any unifying notion of "Europe" and "European values" (and all the more that of "the West") a frivolous and arguably useless abstraction.  

More interestingly, several European languages follow a dualist pattern as it comes to naming key aspects of human existence. This dualism is of a hierarchical sort, as in "high" culture and "popular" culture, the one being attributed a higher value and greater respectability than the other. The same applies to what people do for a living: some produce "works" (Werke in German, from Greek érgon), while others just toil (Mühe in German), implying a possibly degrading and painful (from Greek pónos), at any rate unpleasurable kind of activity. The same applies to what we are here interested in: education. In its nobler version, it is known as Bildung in German and as (versions of) formation in the Latin European languages, while its inferior variant (Erzie-
hung in German, éducation in French) is associated with the subjection of young and immature people to either parental authority or the formal organization of schools in which teachers treat the not-yet-adult and endow them with all the skills, knowledge, and norms that they are thought to need by the authorities in order to function properly in their future adult life. In contrast, education as Bildung or formation is something that can well be part of the conduct of adult life, as when people travel for the sake of Bildung, i.e. go for a Bildungsreise (rather than spend their vacations with "merely" recreational activities). The background to all these distinctions is a code of social class and class inequalities. In most European societies, university students are still a privileged (in terms of expected income and social status) minority of their age cohort. As universities deal with students, who are, after all, (young) adults (and future experts and professional elites) which are legally in full possession of their civil and political rights and responsibilities, it is obviously education as formation that we must be talking about.

Earlier generations of education theorist used to believe that a wholesome distance from the banal realities of the world is nurtured by the teaching of what used to be canonized as classical: classical languages, classical literature, and classical music, as well as the philosophical classics. The distance in time of these subject matters was thought to condition a desirable dis-involvement with current realities, as in Wilhelm von Humboldt's principle of university reform which is centered on "solitude and freedom". Today, we lack such certainties concerning what is classical and hence of timeless value. To the contrary, we have come to understand that "the classics" as an instrument for the accumulation of "cultural capital" that serves the educated upper middle class (Bildungsbürgertum) to defend its pretense to privileged status and to condition the habitus of politically docile machtgeschützte Innerlichkeit. (Thomas Mann) Shielding young people from current social, political, economic realities by administering them generous doses of "the classics" is no longer enough (if it ever was). What is needed is an educational theory that answers a much more specific question: What kind of forces, pressures and institutional patterns are most likely, in our present societal condition, to inflict harm on the ability of young people to build, defend and enhance their autonomy and, correspondingly, what are the most promising educational practices to strengthen that ability?

Again, the code is the noble vs. the ordinary. Before I stick my neck out to suggest an answer to our weighty question, let me just look at the countertendency that is also continuously present in the discourses of educational theorists, practitioners and above all cost-conscious makers of education policies. This is an utterly positivistic tendency to advocate, for the benefit of ordinary people, their early and rigorous introduction into the values as well as the realities of life as it is, to make them employable and useful according to market demand and in as short a time as possi-
ble: and to enforce their conformity with the social, economic and technical requirements of what is anticipated as their appropriate station in life. The antagonism between the two types of educational doctrines is often embodied in the institutional constructs of Gymnasium vs. Realschule, Bildung vs. Ausbildung, or basic vs. applied research. An example of attempts to reconcile the two is the often uneasy and disjointed combination of rigorous practical training with presumably status-enhancing bits and pieces from the storehouse of "western civilization" (the Peloponnesian wars, the Reformation, a few impressionist paintings, etc.) as they are being taught to American undergraduates.

In between, as it were, Humboldt's elitist approach of those conducting their intellectual life in solitude and freedom and the positivist approach to making people useful as soon as possible, there seems to be a third option. It has been the ambition of theorists and critical practitioners of education (such as John Dewey) to shape personalities of (mostly) young people in ways that, at least to some degree, neutralize the de facto educational impact of those institutional settings outside of school and university which "teach" young people without having a any mandate to do so. The logic of this educational ambition is to distance and to an extent uncouple the clients of education from the hidden curricula of the institutions that govern everyday life.3 According to this reasoning, to educate a person means to insulate him or her, to create a hiatus, to protect those persons from the unreflected formative impacts of which young people are thought to be in need of a kind of mental immunization in order to build an autonomous relation to the world. The primary objects from which such protective insulation must be accomplished may vary - the church, the family background of pupils with its linguistic and material constraints, the media, the sphere of consumption, political propaganda, and the demands of economic and occupational life. But education always means some targeted dissociation from overpowering social forces, beginning with the idea that the school is something like a protective shell for young children and not ending with some of the reflective distance that Wilhelm von Humboldt had in mind. The basic idea is that pupils and students must be provided with attitudes and intellectual skills that allow them to defend themselves and their autonomy effectively against the dangers of mental deformation that they are likely to encounter in a given society.

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3 In the same way as only a small part of the health status of a population is to be explained by the services of doctors and hospitals (the quality of nutrition and the number of accidents plays a much bigger role), education is only partly accomplished through formal schooling, the major part being performed by "unauthorized" educators.
The shopping list approach

As at least part of the current student population will occupy leadership positions in business, in politics, in the professions, in the arts and academia etc., and all the more as universities become the prime access route to social and economic success, it is in fact of considerable public interest to see to it that these elites and members of the professional middle class adopt the "right" values and world views. From this, the conclusion has always been tempting that universities and their professors are somehow mandated to make sure that future elites do internalize values such as responsibility, civility, moral awareness, tolerance, and dedication to the public good during their student years, for instance, through the introduction of discipline-specific ethics courses. But that does not follow. First, because universities in modern democratic, pluralist and secular societies do not have the authority to "teach values" to their, after all, adult student clientele according to some "ethical" shopping list. And second because, to the extent these values can at all be taught, they deserve to be taught not only to aspiring future elites but, beyond that, to all citizens through their general education in primary and secondary schools and the informal educational powers mentioned above. Professors and other academic teachers are primarily supposed to be proven experts in their discipline, committed to the generation of new knowledge through research as well as through engaged teaching. They are not - and enjoy no legitimacy as - enunciators of moral or political norms and values. Least of all are they in the business of "shaping" the personalities and "ennoble" the character of members of the next generation.

But the question remains of how universities can contribute to the desirable (I suppose) result that future elites are in fact educated elites. Former Harvard president Lawrence Summers has suggested that in order for someone to qualify as an educated person, s/he must be able to tell the basic difference between a gene and a chromosome. I don't think that can be denied (except if the implication is that universities are responsible for providing that information to students; in fact, people who can answer the question correctly may have learned to do so during their high school years.) Yet apart from the issue of institutional origin of pieces of knowledge, there are two problems with this approach to answering our question of what universities must teach in order to generate "educated" persons. First, this approach can never lead to exhaustive set of criteria of what an educated person "is" or must know. In addition to gene and chromosome, what about the basic defining differences of Sunni and Shiite Islam, atoms and molecules, contracts and constitutions, the mental disorders of psychosis and neurosis, novel and poem, plants and animals, eggs and potatoes as reproductive organs, reforms and revolutions, or savings and investment? It is the obvious inherent endlessness of this "cognitive" shopping list that makes it methodically unhelpful as an approach to answering our question concerning the nature of "being educated".
This is so because, second, nobody - not even a former president of Harvard University - can lay claim to the intellectual authority to canonize what belongs on the educational menu and what not. Wherever the question is being settled, it is settled on the basis of the contingent and possibly biased (as opposed to the compellingly argued) consensus of people who just happen to share the same taste in these matters. I know a feminist author who has argued that cooking - say a proper Boullabaisse provencale - is a skill that an educated person should possess. She might point to the fact that, while you may well acquire at universities the skills of business accounting or study the discipline of driver's education, the same does not apply to the arguably no less demanding and at least equally complex (as well as useful) abilities of advanced cooking. According to her, the omission of cooking from the educational canon is entirely due to the fact that cooking is an activity that has traditionally been performed by women and which, because of this gender bias, is not considered worthy of the standing of an academic discipline and educational esteem.4

I conclude from these considerations that a compellingly valid list of all those substantive items an educated person is supposed to know and be able to perform is unlikely to be ever established. There is neither an authoritative positive criterion on the “essentials” that belong on the list nor a negative one as to what should be excluded. This being so, it seems that we need to make a shift from a substantive to a functional perspective - from the question of what should be known to what function whatever knowledge must fulfil. All true knowledge can be in some way valuable to those who acquire it as well as, through them, to others. More specifically, knowledge that can be acquired at universities can be valuable, I wish to submit, in three ways. It can be (1) intrinsically valuable, it can (2) be instrumentally useful due to its applicability to all kinds of professional and technical tasks, and (3) it can be valuable due to what I call its social exchange value. Let me discuss each of them in turn.

**Knowledge as medium of "autonomy through judgment"**

Academic knowledge has no doubt an intrinsic value, and not just because researchers tend to enjoy the intellectual and aesthetic pleasures of putting their own brainpower to work, further their own understanding of scientific problems, and participate together with others in joint intel-

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lectual efforts, debates, and eventually printable materials. Beyond that, academic knowledge enables us to give and to ask for well-informed reasons and to pass knowledge-based judgment, including the negative judgment on obsolete doctrines and ill-construed concepts. Such judgment, while not being "true" in a technical sense, is nevertheless truthful in that it reflects the unbiased awareness of all relevant points of view. Academic knowledge can enhance, that is, the capacity for autonomous, responsible, and well-considered understanding of aspects of our world. Asking for, having, and giving reasons for one's propositions and actions is a habit that can to even to some extent immunize oneself from the risks of prejudice, deception, cognitive conformism, untenable doctrines, misdirection of one's attention, and the belief in myths. An "adequate understanding", as Robert Dahl, one of the major democratic theorists of our time, has pointed out, is indispensable precondition for the functioning democratic citizens. As informed argument protects us from our own errors, our indifference and myopia, as well as erroneous beliefs that others would like us to hold, it can also improve our capacity for reasoned and valid evaluative judgment.

Let me just briefly emphasize the considerable role that the capacity for refined judgment plays in public life. In recent developments democratic political theory has shifted its focus from the question of "how do people get what they want" (through the institutional machinery of representative government) to the at least equally consequential but much less explored question: "How do people come to want what they want?" The significance of education for a democratic polity is not limited to the democratic principle of equal rights and equal opportunities, in the provision of which schools and universities play obviously a decisive role. Beyond that, education can improve the capacity of citizens to make well-considered ("deliberated") judgments and evaluation. By implication, education is not a private good, benefiting only those who have earned their academic certificates. At the same time, it is a public good, as the degree of ability of "everyone else" to make well-considered judgments can affect "all of us" in significant ways. (Education, as the economists would say, is a good with massive externalities of either a positive or a negative sort.)


6 Whether or not a judgment is a valid judgment (I submit, but cannot elaborate here) depends on how resilient it turns out to be if confronted to three kinds of possible objections: Is it adequately fact-regarding, other-regarding, and future-regarding?

A proposition passes as a reasoned judgment if it is consistent as well as intelligible for others. It does not have to be compelling to others, so that they start to think, speak, and act like the reason-giver himself. This is so because the reason that I have for doing X may derive from my identity (e.g., that of being a religious person) which hence does not apply to an a-religious person to whom the reason is given. On the other hand, the very act of giving reasons (and of demanding reason-giving from others) rests on the intuition that reasons have a quality dimension. Reasons can be better or worse, and the ability to give reasons can be improved through an individual learning process. That assumption contradicts the post-modern and libertarian view that any reason is as good as any other one -- and that the stock market as well as the world in general is entirely moved by causes anyway, not by reasons. An educated person will have the opportunity to familiarize herself with the repertoire of reasons available in a society as it is present in history books, the arts, literature, and social theory; a university should provide students with access to this repertoire without mandating them to rely on any privileged segment within the universe of meanings on which students can draw.

Referring to the humanities as well as the social sciences as the repertoire of reasons does not mean to claim any privilege for these disciplines. They are simply the only ones in which the practice of having, giving, asking for, understanding, and evaluating reasons constitute the object of scientific inquiry. In contrast to the natural sciences, they theorize about phenomena which, as it were, have theories about themselves. They are able to answer the question why they are doing what we find them doing - a question that is obviously nonsensical to address to molecules, cells, or planets. Doing research in the natural sciences is doubtlessly one of the many human activities to which meaning can be attached and for which reasons can be given, accepted, or rejected; at any rate, the choice of research topics on which scientists focus can not be fully derived from the causal processes themselves that scientists study. These choices are guided by reasons, thus making the practise of natural science research a social activity as any other. These reasons and meanings - such as the extension of our theoretical understanding, the quasi-esthetic appeal of innovative hypotheses, the growth of our control over nature, the improvement of human living conditions through technological applications, the augmentation of economic growth and competitiveness - tend to be taken for granted in modern societies. They are deemed so self-evidently valid that the having and giving of reasons may often be looked at as an idle and redundant activity. But it is exactly the overpowering impact that practise of doing science and science-based technology has upon the social life of humanity that calls for a reflective assessment of the reasons for the practise of science.
Nevertheless, universities cannot legitimately claim the mission, competence nor authority to instill value judgments in students of whatever discipline. Such judgment and the reasons that support them can probably not be "taught" anyway, but are mostly acquired in ways other than formal instruction. Judgment formed on the basis of what we learn to be the case - be it in the humanities, the sciences, or the social sciences - can have a literally liberating effect. That happens when we find out that the doctrines, common beliefs, and preferences that are being suggested to us (or even imposed on us by way of manipulation) fail to make sense in the light of carefully scrutinized academic knowledge.

As the Nobel laureate and economist Joseph Stiglitz has remarked (and by far less than half-jokingly so) about the core paradigm of liberal economic theory, Adam Smith's "invisible hand": "You know why the invisible hand is invisible? Because it does not exist." What a liberating insight, to be put to use when it comes to form judgments on all kinds of economic and social issues! Concepts can gain wide currency in spite of the fact that the reality their users pretend to refer to is of an entirely fictitious nature. I mention the case of markets because these can have particularly grave paralyzing implications for our ability to form judgment. For what applies to markets as a social relationship between sellers and buyers of goods and services is this: No supplier of market items argues with you (as opposed to advertises, and with a clear marketing interest) and appeals to your capacity to form judgments as to why you should buy a particular good. Similarly, nobody is entitled to ask you for the reason for which you have actually bought it. (It happens that not even we ourselves are able to provide a reason to our future self in retrospect as to why we bought some item.) You have bought it because you felt like buying it and were able to pay for. Or, from the point of view of the supplier: I have sold it because it just happens to sell well. Both of these utterances are plain tautologies. Market transaction clearly minimizes the need for giving reasons; they thereby tend to wean us of our capacity to do so -- which sometimes may be a good thing and often not, which in turn is a matter of judgment. Such judgment is the more liberating (that is, from error, doctrine, indifference and prejudice) the more it is made on the basis of an unbiased awareness of what markets do and fail to do in a variety of circumstances.

My favorite examples are the relatively recent invention of something called "Islamofascism" and the much older notion in economics that there can be such a thing as a "market-clearing wage".

A similar disuse of our capacity for making judgments often occur in the context of our interaction with professional experts (such as doctors, teachers, nurses, lawyers, brokers, and all kinds of agents and advisers). As they have acquired their expertise through academic training, and as I, the client, have not, I may be led to believe in view of this plain asymmetry that what the expert advises me to do is imperative for me to follow, due to my relative ignorance, while trying to form a judgment of my own on the matter at hand is clearly inappropriate, even stupid. As we tend to be surrounded by experts in all spheres of life, the space for judgments of my own thus becomes rather narrow.

This retreat, however, is often unwarranted. For experts often act, as is well known, for instance, from the interaction between medical experts and their patients, as strategic actors with a considerable routine in exploiting existing informational asymmetries to their own benefit. Even if such strategic action is checked by either standards of professional ethics or/and external control, there is, in all professional practice, a wide range of decisions and social relations that is not determined by the expertise of the expert, but by patterns and habits of social interaction the expert has chosen to apply to "my" interaction with him or her. For whenever someone practices a profession, that person does more than just applying professional knowledge. This differential in the professional interaction between expert and client can well be a legitimate subject of judgments made by the client who thereby defies the expert's claim to functional authority. The client will do so even more effectively if he himself has gained some basic knowledge on the issues the interaction is about, for instance the general nature of "my" health or legal problems. Again, a case of liberation through informed judgment -- call it liberation from a scientistic or technocratic prejudice. But, unfortunately, people who study in and graduate from universities in order to become professional experts tend to hide not just from others but often even from themselves the fact that to a large extent their day-to-day performance rests on motives and considerations other than academic knowledge and its application.

How can the day-to-day operation of a university contribute to cultivating the skill of reasoned judgment? In my view, the answer has to do with two variables. One is the density of vertical (teacher-student) and horizontal (student - student, also teacher-teacher) communication. The other, arguably even more critical is the availability of time during which this communication and its educational effect can unfold. The organizational setup of universities and current strategies of reform (e. g., the "Bologna process") seem to leave but very limited space for these two essential preconditions.

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10 loc. cit. p. 160: "Discourse requires time."
Academic knowledge as a medium of problem solving

Much less needs to be said about the instrumental value of (by definition) new academic knowledge - be it new in the sense that it has not existed before and results from current research (and development) or be it new in the sense that it has resulted from previous research, but is new to the minds of students to which it is brought through academic instruction. Both research and instruction lead to the building of human (and through it, physical) capital, the returns to which occur in the form of enhanced earning power of those trained at the individual level and in the overall improved capacity of societies to resolve (e.g. legal, educational, medical, technical, economic, social, scientific etc.) problems at the collective level - including problems of winning a methodically validated understanding of conditions and developments that are extremely remote in time (as in prehistorical research) or space (as in most of astrophysics).

The "educational", i.e. the "capacity-for-informed-judgment-enhancing" functions of the applied sciences are, or so I wish to argue, no less significant than the "liberating" and "enlightening" ones discussed in the previous section. However, they come as a by-product of applied research and application-oriented instruction, and they do not come with necessity and under all institutional circumstances of science as it is organized in universities (as well as in research facilities of business corporations).

In order to do applied research and development, someone must decide what the relevant reference problem is that is to be resolved by the organized effort of teachers and researchers within a given discipline or interdisciplinary cooperation. It seems important to see that the answer to that question can never be fully derived from academic knowledge itself. True, many academic books and papers end with a stereotypical formula: "As our analysis has shown, much further research on ... is needed." Yet no analysis can actually show that. Such rhetoric is motivated by the obvious interest of researchers to win the support of granting agencies. It is not the case that the lacunae in our current state of knowledge can determine the priorities of future research. For the link between current ignorance and future research is never made on the basis of scientific argument alone; it is primarily made through negotiated decisions among interested actors, of which representative actors of the academic community or the respective discipline are typically just one.

This problem and its (at any rate "extra-scientific") solution can give rise to discourses and debate which are - unless, that is, they are repressed and banned to arenas behind tightly closed doors - of potentially great educational value and impact. The focus of such debates is: How do
we identify problems that are worthy of our research efforts, how do we weigh competing claims for resources, and how are decision makers in these matters justified to make this kind of decisions? Analogously, what kind of results should pass as a solution to the problem in question, and how do we, as a professional community, evaluate both the opportunity costs of a particular research effort and the balance between intended vs. unintended (side-) effects of the solution of a problem? In all fields of applied research, the involvement of as many as possible scientifically qualified people in the making of these kinds of unavoidable decisions would clearly imply, apart from arguably better decision outcomes, vast educational benefits generated in the process that come in the form of an enhanced capacity for competent judgment among participants.

The so-called "10/90 gap" in pharmaceutical and other medical research is a good example of how experts might educate themselves by giving and demanding reasons that speak for or against particular research agendas. This field of research, which is largely conducted by commercial companies outside of universities, is well known as a scene where the setting of research agendas is largely steered by economic interest. The structure of incentives and property rights results in a distribution where only "10 per cent of all pharmaceutical research is focused on diseases that account for 90 per cent of the global burden of disease. ... Companies prefer even the trivial ailments of the affluent, such as hair loss and acne. ... The present regime guides pharmaceutical research in the wrong direction." An educated person, to put it simply, is a pharmacologist who is competent to provide and demand reasons as to how this imbalance came into being and what can be done about it.

The social exchange value of knowledge.

The late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has coined the concept of "cultural capital". By this he means neither the function of knowledge to improve the capacity for making reasoned autonomous judgment nor the function of solving problems, but the function to impress others

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and gain advantage through the demonstration effect of the display of knowledge. For instance, academic titles earned are supposed to make life easier for its holders, as they have reason to expect (and sometimes even feel entitled to enforce that expectation) that partners in everyday interactions (tax consultants, restaurant managers, car repair mechanics) will be more forthcoming and accommodating if the person they serve displays an academic title or is identified as working in one of the academic professions. People who are able to converse in a high brow style on uncommon and culturally valued topics (or who even own objects, such as paintings or books, that betray their refined taste) can do so just in order to signal distinctive abilities which entitle them (or so they think) to the esteem of others, both above them and below them in social status. The ostentatious presentation of one's educational accomplishments is often being used by academically skilled speakers to gain influence, status, power, prestige and the advantages associated with these, such as career promotion. According to Bourdieu, the inconspicuous use of the exchange value of academic knowledge works as an important mechanism of the reproduction of class inequalities. This third type of motives for which academic training is being sought, the desire for symbolic advantage and esteem, is obviously of the least educational value. But it is also likely to play a declining role as tertiary education expands further and becomes a mass phenomenon which less and less allows for the pretence of social distinctiveness.

The practice of reflexivity

What I have tried to argue for in these remarks is the view that to be educated means to be experienced and methodically trained in the practice of reflexivity. The paradigm case of reflexivity is the common use of everyday language. Here, it is demonstrably true that whenever a person utters a proposition ("The bus is going to leave in ten minutes"), the speaker implies that this proposition is both true and situationally relevant. In other words, the speaker commits himself to giving a meaningful and acceptable answer to the potential follow-up question of "Why do you say that?" This question of the other speaker can be motivated by a variety of points. For instance, he might say: "I told you that I am not leaving today" or "Today is Sunday and the bus runs on a different schedule", etc. And here the interaction ends. A proper academic discourse is supposed to be one in which the first speaker has a clear and well-considered answer to whatever objection the second speaker might raise. The educational value of this discourse consists in teaching not just propositions, but the appropriate answer to questions that are intended to challenge the proposition. Just imagine the situation in a large lecture theater, with a professor developing a complex account of one of his specialties in front of the audience. A student interrupts and asks in a tone of perfect politeness: "Professor, can you just briefly remind us why you think
it is important for us to know what you are just telling us?" An educated person, and by implication a person competent to educate others, is someone able to respond to this intervention with a transparent and coherent answer (though not necessarily one that *convinces* everyone in the room).

When you enter the campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, Cal., you see a glass case with a map of the campus, meant to help people who need to find their way. At the bottom of the map, there is a big red dot. The legend says: "Red dot" = "You are here". To the side of this sign, a student has scribbled the words: "Yes, but *why*?" It seems to me that this unknown student promises to be a model of an educated person.