

**Humboldt Is (Not) Dead:
A Social Systems Perspective on Reforming European Universities**

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“The world is ruled by letting things take their course.

It cannot be ruled by interfering.”

(Laozi, 48)

Introduction

In the higher education literature of the past two decades, the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt rarely come up in any context other than forecasting their demise. The model of higher education known as Humboldtian is frequently designated an atavism of a bygone era, mismatched with the demands of the information age (Renaut, 2006; Tavoletti, 2010; Pechar, 2012). Foundational notions of pursuing truth for its own sake, academic self-governance, and the unity of teaching and research have come under social and political pressure. Yet despite vigorous attempts by governments and supra-national agendas to reform European universities, many remain stubbornly attached to their “Humboldtian” identity. Studies of academic staff confirm that despite the environmental forces embattling Humboldt’s model, political pressures to do away with it, and organizational arrangements that make its realization impossible, Humboldtian tenets still form the core of organizational identity for many universities organized or reformed according to the model (Krücken, 2003; Pechar, 2012, Pabian, Sina & Kincilova, 2011). As governments and reformers attempt to forge a new role for European universities, they contend not only with the powerful Humboldtian tradition, but also with decades of research showing that reforms of higher education institutions are notoriously difficult to institute, and they usually fail (Levine, 1980; Clark, 1987; Psacharopoulos, 1989; Wildavsky, Kelly & Carey, 2011; Hotho, 2013).

This paper investigates the qualities of the Humboldtian reform that rendered it profoundly effective in its own time, arguing that Wilhelm Von Humboldt's accomplishment consisted in the naming and application of an institutional identity that has had been long present before. That identity still persists in European universities to this day, and once again requires to be named and applied.

Arguments presented in this paper are the results of a theoretical analysis at the conclusion of two research projects conducted by the co-authors in Poland in 2011-2014, focusing on governance and external pressures for change in higher education. In their respective research projects, the authors conducted over 30 interviews with senior academic leaders and policymakers, and surveyed academic staff of four public institutions in southern Poland. This paper adopts a non-empirical approach to analyze the application of a theory that emerged in the course of empirical research as a promising lens to explain change and non-change in European universities. The argument is rooted in systems theory and based on an exhaustive review of the literature on the retrospective construction of the "Humboldtian" model of the university.

Circumstances of a historic exception

Burton Clark, the father of higher education as an academic field, famously asked: "How can it be that the university, and indeed the higher education system at large, is sluggish, even heavily resistant to change, but somehow also produces virtually revolutionary change? (...) There is so much observable inertia that we need a theory of non-change." (Clark, 1987, p. 101). What may appear like a historic exception to the pattern of non-change observed by Clark is the series of events following the foundation of the University of Berlin on principles articulated by the reformer Wilhelm von Humboldt – the very principles that have come to symbolize the forces of tradition and continuity. In debates over the future of the post-Humboldtian university, there have so far been no attempts to inspect what made

Humboldt's ideas so contagious, pervasive and long-lasting in the first place. How did Humboldt succeed when so many reformers of higher education fail?

The circumstances surrounding the unusually deep, and lasting transformation of European universities in the 19th century bear some resemblance to the present challenges faced in the higher education sector. Von Humboldt's University of Berlin was founded at the time when European universities faced a severe crisis of their identity. As modern nation states were being born, and the Enlightenment stirred new currents in the intellectual life of the continent, universities faced dropping enrollments and financial difficulties. They came under attack for continuing to favor scholastic traditions focusing on revealed knowledge, even as epistemological foundations had already shifted under European feet (Bahti, 1987). In these circumstances, the institution of the university at the turn of the 19th century was "more threatened than perhaps at any time before or afterwards" (Wittrock, 1993, p. 314). In France, universities were discredited in favor of specialist colleges, while a similar trend in Germany was even accompanied by calls for closing all universities and replacing them with vocational institutions of a more applied character (Renaut, 2006).

Today, universities face another identity crisis prompted by technological progress leading to a radical democratization of knowledge, the constructivist turn in epistemology, and increasing demands from nation states and supranational agendas for universities to become engines of the global knowledge economy. While the European university may not be threatened in its institutional existence, many feel that its essential identity is under siege. The system as a whole struggles to adapt to the European Union's Lisbon postulates of training an employable workforce and spurring economic development amidst opposition from those charged with implementing the reform – the academics themselves. Attempts by governments to reform universities along lines perceived as departing from the Humboldtian values are met

with fierce opposition. Humboldt has become contemporary academics' rallying cry against forces of massification and academic capitalism.

At Wilhelm von Humboldt's University of Berlin, the shifting grounds were not ignored, but the response did not fully align with political expectations. Von Humboldt reinforced the value of truth for its own sake, but he grounded on new epistemological footing. Scholastic disputes were replaced by research seminars, teaching aligned closely with research, and academic governance altered to include new interest groups. Quietly at first, the reform "forged a new idea of the university around which most of the hopes placed in universities in Europe and even elsewhere were able to crystallise" (Renaut, 2006, p. 124).

Three qualities of the "Humboldtian" transformation appear particularly remarkable from the contemporary perspective of attempted and often futile change efforts in higher education. From the perspective of two centuries, these reforms appear seamless, contagious, and impressively resilient. The historical record includes little indication of any vigorous opposition to the change, which at the time must have appeared of tectonic proportions. In contrast to the situation following the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy in the 2000s, the "Humboldtian" transformation appears to have taken root rather seamlessly. Despite its extensive scope, the transition that occurred in Humboldt's day appears easy compared to the reforms attempted since.

In time, "Humboldtian" ideals spread to places as distant from the University of Berlin as the United States and Japan, taking deep root even in institutions quite different than research universities. Wherever these ideals arrived, they have proven remarkably resilient (Schwinges, 2001; Krull, 2005). Contemporary studies of academic staff confirm that despite the environmental pressures to the contrary, Humboldtian tenets form the core of organizational identity for many universities organized or reformed according to the model (Krücken, 2003; Pechar, 2012, Pabian et al., 2011). It speaks to the resilience of the model

that what the German reformer stands for is not only alive and well, but flying on the banners of academics in Germany (Krücken, 2003; Pritchard, 2004), Austria (Pechar, 2012), the Czech Republic (Pabian et al., 2011), Italy (Tavoletti, 2010), and Poland (Sauerland, 2006; Shaw, 2014).

A theoretical lens to solve the puzzle

As noted above, success in reforming universities happens rarely, if ever. At the same time, it is widely accepted that Humboldt's revolutionary ideas have sunk so deeply that they are hard to remove even today, when claimed unsatisfactory and inadequate. Why, then, has this particular model succeeded in the domain where today's reformatory attempts seem simply doomed to fail? A theoretical perspective of social systems autopoiesis, which has been recently proposed to investigate organizational identity of universities (Lenartowicz 2014), appears to render a clear, yet surprising, answer to that puzzle.

From the perspective of systems theory, universities – just like other human organizations (and just like plants, computers, cities, organisms, minds, and families, etc.) – are systems. As such, they are objects of interest of interdisciplinary investigation that searches for patterns that can either be found in all systems, or appear at certain level of a system's complexity and get more and more sophisticated along the way up. One such pattern is the process of a system's autopoiesis, or recursive self-production. The concept of autopoiesis was coined by two systems biologists from Chile, Humberto Maturana (2002, 2010) and Francesco Varela (Maturana and Varela 2010); and made its way to social sciences mainly through the works of Niklas Luhmann (1986, 1990a, b, 1995, 2000, 2009). The term describes the basic operational principle that differentiates any living system (e.g. a cell, an organism) from artificially created machines. In short, autopoiesis is a principle of continuous, recursive self-production as a fundamental process that governs all system's activities. It has been argued by Luhmann, accepted by some (Seidl 2004, 2005, 2009; Seidl

and Becker 2006; Magalhães and Sanchez 2009), and rejected by others (e.g. Mingers 1995), that the same pattern characterizes not only biological, but social systems as well.

In Luhmann's theory, while biological systems self-produce out of the organic matter, social systems do so out of human communication. New social systems emerge whenever there is a new tension in society, one that needs to be released. The release is accomplished through the appearance of a new semantic differentiation within the sphere of human communication. A new distinction emerges in which people can choose sides, or are assigned ones. This way a new social boundary is created to contain the tension. That boundary differentiates the newly aroused phenomenon from the rest of the world, and this way a new social system is created. Social systems originate from such distinctions, and in an autopoietic fashion, they perpetuate themselves on from one distinction to another. The theory of autopoiesis makes it clear that further distinctions within a social system are conditioned by ones that had previously been made. In this context it is not surprising, as Arthur L. Stinchcombe (1965) has noticed, that there exists a 'correlation between the time in history that a particular type of organization was invented and the social structure of that type which exists at the present time' (p. 143). Luhmann's theory provides an explanation as to why it happens. Initial distinctions that give rise to an organization serve as a frame for all subsequent ones. Initial distinctions that shape social relations are thus always present, just as are the initial distinctions that shape organizational structure, operations, culture, behaviors, etc. They can be deemed obsolete, but cannot be completely overcome and forgotten, as they serve as a frame of departure for each next distinction to come. Some of them are repeated over and over - and these are the distinctions that reproduce the system's root identity.

All potential future states of an autopoietic system are conditioned by its previous states, not by external influences. Of course, for an organism, or an organization, such self-production requires constant exchange of matter with the system's environment – in that

sense living and social systems are all *open* systems (Bertalanffy, 1968). But the blueprint according to which the system is organizing itself is its own creation, not the environment's. This means that exact 'shopping list' of kinds and quantities of matter that is valuable for an organism are predefined by its specific identity, and not by the environment's 'shop window'. What rules the exchange between the system and its environment is its own autopoiesis – or to use another biological image, the DNA governing its self-production. In a language-constructed, distinction-based Luhmannian social system, all that is happening within a system is framed by its own distinctions. Any input from the environment (i.e. from other linguistically-constructed, distinction-based social systems) gets instantly translated by the autopoietic system into its own distinctions.

This characteristics of social systems, understood as autopoietic entities, creates a serious limitation to the idea of an external (e.g. political) steering of their transformations. For an autopoietic system, an external influence is a mere perturbation that gets immediately compensated by the system. An external influencer resembles someone playing with a kaleidoscope: he can make a change necessary, he can provide a shake-up or a shock – but he cannot control the resulting display. Thus Von Humboldt, acting from the position of the Ministry of Education, could not have imposed his own created distinctions if they were absent in his target systems.

Autopoietic Interpretation

Through the lens of the *autopoiesis* theory, new ideas within an organization that become easily adopted are those compatible with the root identity. Ideas that face opposition, on the other hand, are those at odds with the code of self-production – a point noted in the research of academic disciplines by Luhmann's disciple, Rudolf Stichweh (1990, 2013).

If Humboldt was adopted easily, prevails deeply, and is hard to let go, it must have “hit” the right note in the core identity of the European university. Wilhelm von Humboldt re-discovered and adapted essential distinctions shaping a European university’s identity. His assumptions about what a university is and how it should operate correspond to the organizational DNA that serves as a filter in the relations of the university with its environment. These assumptions are evident in the three pillars of what has become known as the “Humboldtian” university: the pursuit of truth, academic self-governance, and the unity of teaching and research. The following three sections demonstrate the much older roots of each of von Humboldt’s three distinctions – roots stretching back to “the time in history that a particular type of organization was invented” (Stinchcombe, 1965, p. 143)

First Pillar: Truth

It has been argued (Lenartowicz, 2015) that the concept of truth served as the very first distinction that has allowed systems of universities to emerge. At the time of universities’ emergence, the new tension demanding a release was not of truth as distinct from falsehood, but as distinct from emotion, common sense – and primarily from religious revelation. Just before the first medieval universities were created, respect for human reason and logical speculation had been gaining traction (Rüegg, 1992). Truth, as it has been framed in university halls since those times, is understood as a product of rational thinking obtained through established rules. This concept of rationally derived truth gradually became a platform of collaboration in that it provided a clear distinction separating the emerging social system from others, most of all from the system of religion. Pierre Abelard's (1120) "Sic et Non" can be read as a manifesto that sets the rules for cooperation made possible by the agreement of what truth was, and what it wasn't: “The master key of knowledge is, indeed, a

persistent and frequent questioning” (p. 1). As the amount of rationally proven knowledge increased, it became impossible for one person to assimilate it, and dispersed scholars began to form groups that became known as universities (Pedersen, 1997).

Second Pillar: Self-Governance

The second pillar of reforms associated with Von Humboldt appears to have its roots in a much older distinction that occurred as the new social system of the university selected a form of organization from the menu of options available at the time. Academics chose to organize themselves in a manner used by craftsmen, in the form of professional guild (Rüegg, 1992). This initial selection determined the types of social relations, both external and internal to the university. As Pedersen (1997) notes, the relationship between academics and the ruling classes of the day had been ambivalent from the very start. The benefits derived from the scholars’ presence prompted royal and papal authorities to offer their protection and support, but academics were never subjugated to political interests, using their influence with one power group to receive concessions from another (Pedersen, 1997). Building on the distinction of rationally derived truth, this second distinction enabled the creation of formal and autonomous organizations. The task of guarding the independence of individual scholars in their pursuit of truth fell to a collegial structure of a professional association. Thus, academic autonomy and self-governance, or, as Krücken (2003) puts it, “social disembeddedness” (p. 324), has been a feature of the university from its founding moments.

Third Pillar: The Unity of Teaching and Research

The idea of the unity of teaching and research is perhaps Von Humboldt's most recognizable legacy – yet this unity had been much greater in medieval universities than in Humboldtian ones. In the scholastic method, searching for the truth was organized in a form of debates to which students listened and contributed. New truths were discovered and disseminated in a community of *studiorum et studentium* – teachers and learners. The identity of the university thus became the accumulation of truth in a community of masters and students – an idea recalled, but not invented by Wilhelm Von Humboldt. Thus, we argue, the “reform” of Von Humboldt was in fact not a reform at all.

Adaptation vs. Reform

Our interpretation of Von Humboldt's “reform” as naming and application of a pre-existing institutional identity gains support from the work of historians studying the migration of the “Humboldtian” model. Paletschek (2001), for instance, demonstrates that “from the nineteenth-century perspective, the foundation of the University of Berlin did not represent a major break with tradition” (p. 38). Rothblatt & Wittrock (1993) call the model a “retrospective construction” (p. 117) – a view shared by a collaboration between 25 prominent historians of higher education, who concluded that the model as known and admired today was in fact a 20th century construction developed at a time when the model was already in crisis (Schwinges, 2001; see also Paletschek, 2001; De Ridder-Symoens, 2006).

What Von Humboldt and his contemporaries did accomplish was an adaptation of the existing DNA to an altered environment, changed by the development of science. They accomplished a skillful recasting of the traditional university mission into a form appropriate for a new time, creating forms by which the autopoietic processes of the university could continue in the new Enlightenment paradigm. The new paradigm (Kuhn, 1963), emerging together with the new structures of a modern nation-state, demanded a new relation between

the autopoietic processes of the university and the allopoietic processes of the environment in which it functioned. Von Humboldt accepted what universities had always done, and argued that it is in the state's best interest to harness the university to their own autopoietic processes by allowing universities a measure of autonomy with a guarantee of continued funding. Von Humboldt set up the relationship between the university and the state in a way that completely honored the identity of both, while also institutionalizing this identity in a way that was relevant to the developments of the structure of scientific knowledge itself.

The Crisis of Humboldt

At the beginning of the 21st century, the epistemological ground has shifted again, and the pillars of Humboldt's concept of the university appear to be crumbling. The pursuit of truth for its own sake, academic self-governance, and the unity of teaching and research all bend under the pressures of globalization spreading the allopoietic demand that universities become engines of the knowledge economy. Universities organized after Humboldt's model have been caught in a crossfire of increasingly massified higher education systems at a time of a declining welfare state (Clark, 1997; Schimank & Winnes, 2000; Krücken, 2003; Schimank, 2009). We observe three major ways in which the ground has shifted again, calling for a new Humboldt to restate and recast the identity of the university for the post-modern, post-Fordist age of the "third wave" of civilizational development (Toffler, 1981).

Disunity of teaching and research

First, the transition from elite to mass higher education since the 1960s elevated the profile of teaching in relation to research at all but the most elite universities (Clark, 1997). In Europe, additional resources provided to expand existing universities and fund new ones were

targeted towards expanding their teaching capacity, shifting both institutional resources and faculty time towards instruction (Schimank & Winnes, 2000). Since the 1960s, the number of students in the OECD countries has grown tenfold, which could not leave the traditional nexus of teaching and research intact. As Ash (2006) points out, “Humboldt’s ideals were created for a university at which at most 1% of a given age group studied, and therefore bear little relation to the realities of present-day mass higher education” (p. 248). The motivations of most students and governments that invested in boosting enrollments had to do with social and economic development, not a Humboldtian pursuit of truth for its own sake.

Stakeholder governance

Second, governance of public universities by a corporation of professors with little external oversight appears in stark contrast to the norms of managerial efficiency in the private sector, and stakeholder accountability in the public one. The World Bank recently went as far as to call the traditional model of university governance “a form of privatization of public institutions to the benefit of specific internal stakeholder groups” (World Bank, 2002, p. 62).

Departure from the Humboldtian model or at least its significant modification is widely accepted as a necessity even by those sympathetic to its tenets (Renaut, 2006; Michelsen, 2010; Schimank, 2009). Even in Humboldt’s homeland, there are voices ranging from that of the former minister of education who claimed that “Humboldt is dead” to a milder claim that he is simply “The wrong man in the wrong place” at 21st century universities” (Schimank, 2009).

Multiplicity of truths

Finally, very notion of pursuing truth has fallen on hard times in the postmodern times of suspicion towards certainties and metanarratives. The view of the university as a depository of all human knowledge has come apart with the staggering proliferation and specialization of information that is increasingly open and up for a variety of interpretations. At the same time, the idea of pursuing knowledge for its own sake strikes many a modern sensibility as unworthy of public investment, “dead and gone” as a guiding principle (Kwiek, 2008, p. 8). In Europe in particular, the expansion of the enrollment pool has produced a clash between the values of the privileged class that had traditionally dominated universities, and those of the newly ascendant classes interested in education not as an end in itself, but as a means for upward mobility (Schimank, 2009; Krücken, 2003). It is the values of the former that were at the foundation of Humboldt’s model, and they have since been contested, especially in times of fiscal austerity (Krücken, 2003).

Conclusions

Continuing tensions show that despite some agreement on the need for reform, a new paradigm has not yet emerged to parallel Humboldt’s own influential model of Berlin University. If Humboldt’s success is to be repeated, and a new contagious and resilient vision of the university for the next century is to emerge, the “new von Humboldt” would need to mitigate the perturbations from the systems of politics and the economy, reunite teaching with the evolved system of research, and most of all, reclaim the core distinction of truth against other claims about reality.

In the end, it is Pilate’s age-old question by which the university enterprise thrives or withers. Much like in translation theory, the question of rendering Von Humboldt’s pillars intelligible in the present day is a question of equivalence. From the current perspective, the “translation”

of truth from medieval to modern terms appears vastly less complex than its interpretation in a postmodern language that presumes reality and rationality to be socially constructed. The extent to which the foundational distinction of the university can be “translated” depends in a large part on the choice of a unit of translation – the cognitive component or “image” (Tabakowska, 1993) employed for the purpose of determining equivalence. What angle of equivalence can and should be maintained for “truth” to be recognizable again as the initial distinction of the university? It is the answer to this question, more than the Lisbon Strategy, that will determine whether root identity pillars of the university stand or crumble in the postmodern age.

Implications for further research

The deductive insights presented in this paper, combining the Humboltian model and the theory of autopoiesis, are proposed here as an opening for further research efforts, aimed at their empirical testing. This might be done either by an in-depth historical query into organizational values incorporated by each and every medieval university in its initial years, or by an interpretative study of how these foundational moments are being remembered today in institutional narratives. Empirical verification could also consist of a quantitative study comparing success and failure rates of “Humboltian” vs. “non-Humboltian” organizational change attempts, designed to examine the extent to which the pillars discussed in this paper have indeed been serving as an attractor of organizational dynamics of European universities throughout centuries.

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