



Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 9

January 1994

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Giuseppe F. Mazzotta

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Recommended Citation

Giuseppe F. Mazzotta, *Vico and the University*, 6 *YALE J.L. & HUMAN.* (1994).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol6/iss1/9>

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Vico and the University

Giuseppe F. Mazzotta

Few intellectuals of the seventeenth century produced their works from within the structure of an academic institution. Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz—to mention the names of the epochal figures of that historical period—were deeply committed to a new way of thinking about knowledge. They even took part in its worldwide dissemination, but they shunned the politics and constraints, the anti-quarianism and erudition of the universities as stifling any openness to the thought of the new. Bacon's *Cogitata et Visa* (1620) ponders on and sharply indicts the educational methods followed within the universities.

There were notable exceptions to this practice. One exception was Galileo; another was Comenius. Still another was Vico (1688-1744), who came later and who understood exactly why Bacon, for instance, would stay away from the university. Vico spent his entire life as a teacher of rhetoric and literature at the University of Naples, and he developed his major works both within, and in opposition to, the perimeter of Naples's academic structure. The University of Naples, as we gather from his *Autobiography* (1725-28), was certainly not a comfortable place for Vico. Most Italian universities (Padua, Modena, Reggio) came into existence out of a schism from the University of Bologna, which was one of the two parent universities of Europe. Similarly, the University of Naples was founded against the University of Bologna by the Emperor Frederick II, who needed, among other things, experts in statecraft, agents for diplomatic missions, and lawyers to settle sundry disputes. The University of Naples was the first state school of Europe, and it never lost the trace of its institutional origin—the political censorship of the professors. The professors' oaths of loyalty to the city removed all doubt as to who worked for whom. From a purely personal point of view, Vico had few reasons to harbor illusions about the ethics shaping the inner life of the university. He knew firsthand the power games academics play, and he even played some himself. His account of how he had been denied the prestigious Law Professorship that he had long coveted and had to settle for the lower-paying and less prestigious Chair of

Eloquence occupies a prominent role in his autobiographical narrative.

It is probable that Vico stayed at the university because he had no other choice. But he also theorized—against Bacon, or against Hobbes's idea of the isolated thinker without contemporaries—that the time had passed when one man alone could undertake the task of the total reorganization of culture. In antiquity, Socrates's majestic intellect cast him as a whole university. For Vico, that role could only be played in modern times by the university, by an aggregate of persons, a community both within and apart from the civic community. In his *Inaugural Orations* (1699-1707) and *Study Method of Our Times* (1709), Vico develops the idea of the ambivalent and even scandalous quality of the university: the university is both integrally part of, and subjected to, the city, and is, at the same time, insulated from, marginal to, and transcendent of, the values of the marketplace.

From the figures of the past he loved most—Plato, Campanella, Bacon—Vico had learned that all speculations about education are monotonously, unavoidably placed within a utopian setting. His speculations are different; he muses on education in the context of the university structure, as if it were his utopia. Not that he ever really thought that the *Republic*, *The City of the Sun* (1602), and the *New Atlantis* (1626) were just essays in utopian political theory. They are about utopian politics to the same extent they are about education, and Vico directly faced the truth of this insight.

Vico lived in a Cartesian world of scientific research, a world in which science established values. He knew that Bacon had traveled to a new continent in order to find in Bensalem, a utopian society organized along scientific lines—the values of peace, justice, truth, and honor. Vico, who sympathized with Machiavelli's skepticism about utopia in chapter XV of *The Prince* (1513), had no doubt that Bacon's utopian foundation of education was in fact a strategy of Machiavelian power. This critique of Bacon's cultural enterprise is unmistakable: the Baconian interpretation of nature, as the opening paragraph of the *Study Methods of Our Times* remarks, is a thinly disguised project of the Cartesian *conquest* of nature.

Book VII of the *Republic* describes the logic of the university curriculum. At the heart of Plato's educational idea there is a double polemic: one is the banishment of the poets, because poetry poses a moral and intellectual danger, because poets are useless, and because they indulge in illusionism, confuse all values, and have no idea of the truth. The other is against the sophists, who live in and by the laws of the marketplace and make market knowledge a market commodity. Understanding this double polemic is crucial for grasping Vico's critique of Plato's vision of the university in ancient Greece, because

Vico's own idea of the university focuses on these two correlated Platonic questions. In *The Study Method of Our Times* Vico argues for a necessary coordination of the various disciplines into a single system. As one gathers from his *Inaugural Orations*, delivered at the university, the university is primarily a *politeia*—a place where students, inspired by pragmatic utilitarianism, gather for careers that grow rich. Yet this does not completely exhaust the possibilities of a university. The university also forms a boundary between itself and the world; it is in many ways an anti-world which resists and counters the political-utilitarian values of the world. The alliance between the city and the university—this is Vico's necessarily oblique argument—dissolves exactly because of *ethical* and *political* questions.

Ethically, like the Republic of Letters, which he views as an institution apart from the university, the university must be regulated by what he calls *honestas*. This term is used by the adherents to the Republic of Letters—such as Spinoza and Leibnitz—to mean acknowledgment of other possible points of view. Historically, the term *honestas* was deployed to counter the skeptical ideology of the libertines, those intellectuals who reduce the world to objects for their own despotic dominion.

Politically, Vico's protreptics, as it were, insist that, "No one of you [the students] will have to swear an oath of fealty to any professor, as happens so often in the sectarianism of the schools." Thus, as a place where individuals teach different things in flat contradiction to one another, the university transcends the particularisms of the city interests and the tyranny of individual viewpoint.

It is because contradiction is exactly what he expects from the university and from the new knowledge he envisions that Vico puts "The Discovery of the True Homer" at the very center of both his *New Science* (1744) and the university curriculum. "The Discovery of the True Homer" is the point of encounter and leave-taking from Plato's *Republic*, as it turns into a passionate interrogation of the truth of discovery which makes it coextensive with antiquity.

Like Plato, Vico knew that poetry can neither give moral guidance nor be used to "edify" us. Should we approach literature in that spirit we will simply reduce literature to an approximation of what we think we need to know, and we will not get anywhere. Against Plato, who no longer believed that Homer could or should be the educator of Hellas, Vico thought that we must look to Homer and Dante (the Tuscan Homer) if we want to penetrate realities denied to the prosaic intellect and hidden by the poetasters (who are busy promoting themselves and their one-sided views). We read Homer and Dante because their voices cannot be reduced to one single discourse. Homer's poetry was for Vico the model of the politics of the university. Like

the university Vico envisions, Homer and Dante present a universal knowledge made available by an imagination capable of cutting through all partitions and boundaries. There is no lying at the heart of such knowledge—as Plato believed—because poetry is subjectively always true.

Vico, a master-etymologist, knew what a university ought to be. In the Middle Ages the word for university—*universitas*—was thought to mean an *universitas facultatum*, a school in which all the faculties or branches of knowledge are represented. This etymology, as medieval documents reveal, is false. The word *universitas* has a legal origin: it designates a plurality or association of persons, such as a college, a guild, or a corporation. Vico exploited this double sense of the word: the university professes to teach universal knowledge, knowledge of the totality of parts, because *universum* means all-inclusive, composed of many parts—literally, “turned into one.”

For Vico, there can be no opposition between scientism and humanism, which is the offshoot of the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns. It also means that for him the university stands halfway between being a necessary subordinate to the government of the city and being a continued oppositional force to it. The university, in short, is best embodied by the contradictory nature of literature, which Vico also makes the model for a necessarily fragmented social order—a unity made of independent parts. Divided against itself, self-contradictory like the Homeric poems, but never neutral—this is his vision of the university, its value, and its bad conscience.