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# Deconstructing Distinctions. The European University in Comparative Historical Perspective

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## abstract

This article analyzes the history and the specific characteristics of the European university in comparison with other institutions of higher learning and knowledge production. It is argued that most of the characteristics that the university had could also be found in other institutions of higher learning. The article then discusses the academic autonomy as possibly the only distinguishing characteristic attributed to the European university by a wide consensus. It is argued that the university has never been truly autonomous from its socio-political context, which makes the claim to exceptionality of the European university highly questionable.

## keywords

History of higher education, university, knowledge production, academic autonomy

The idea that the European university has a special status among the institutions of knowledge production is pervasive in academic literature.<sup>1</sup> This status often borders on superiority attributing to the university exceptional qualities. An essential feature of this discourse is the existence of a particular characteristic that

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<sup>1</sup> See Huff, Toby (2003). *Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West* (2nd ed). Cambridge University Press; Makdisi, George (1989). "Scholasticism and Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (2), 175-182; Rashdall, Hastings (2010). *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages, Volume I: Salerno, Bologna, Paris*. Cambridge University Press; Ridder-Symoens, Hilde de, ed. (1992). *A History of the University in Europe. Volume I: Universities in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press; Ridder-Symoens, Hilde de, ed. (1996). *A History of the University in Europe. Volume II: Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800)*. Cambridge University Press; Rüegg, Walter, ed. (2004). *A History of the University in Europe. Volume III: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800-1945)*. Cambridge University Press; Rüegg, Walter, ed. (2010). *A History of the University in Europe. Volume IV: Universities since 1945*. Cambridge University Press.

distinguishes the university from other comparable organizations of higher education and knowledge production.

Various characteristics were suggested as peculiar to the institution of the university. Among them were such as the presence of knowledge professionals, the right to formal certification, the instruction in a variety of disciplines, research production, and the training of social and political elites. The exclusivity of these characteristics to the European university is heavily contested in several recent works.<sup>2</sup> However, there is an almost universal consensus about one peculiar feature of the university – its academic autonomy. To sum up this idea: at one point or another, the university became highly autonomous from the rest of the social system. This autonomy allowed it to claim certain objectivity compared with other similar organizations of knowledge production. The goal of this paper is to analyze in detail the claim to the special status of the European university and the characteristics that may warrant such status. To this purpose the paper provides an overview of various institutions of higher learning and knowledge production in historical perspective. This includes a detailed analysis of development and evolution of the university itself. Thus, the article examines the specifics of the European university by comparing it to other institutions with similar purpose.

It is argued that the university is hardly different from other organizations of higher learning and knowledge production that existed throughout human history. Historical analysis shows that other institutions of higher learning were very similar to the university in all but few characteristics. The widely held opinion that the university is more autonomous than other similar organizations will also be put under scrutiny. It will be analyzed how the nominal legal autonomy of the university peculiar to its historical development is influenced by the real workings of the socio-political system in which it is embedded. As a matter of fact, the university was always subjected to political and economic control, censorship and even occasional purges. Hence, one can assume that it is not much different from other institutions of knowledge production neither in its more general characteristics, nor in the real degree of its autonomy.

To argue this point, this article is organized in six sections. In the first section it provides a historical overview of various institutions of higher learning and knowledge production and their principal characteristics. The second section deals with pre-university institutions of higher learning in Europe. In the third and fourth sections the origin and development of the European university is elucidated. The fifth section compares the main features of the European university to that of other institutions of knowledge production. Finally, the sixth section discusses the issue of academic autonomy as a purportedly distinctive feature of the European university.

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<sup>2</sup> See Alatas, Syed Farid (2006). "From Jami'ah to University: Multiculturalism and Christian-Muslim Dialogue," *Current Sociology* 54 (1), 112-132; Moutsios, Stavros (2012). *The European Particularity*. Aarhus Working Papers on University Reform.

### **Spaces of Savants: Higher Learning in Historical Perspective.**

The striving for knowledge seems to be an integral characteristic of human beings. Be it an evolutionary adaptation or a mechanism of coping with essential uncertainty of being, accumulation and transmission of knowledge is pervasive in human cultures. At least since the Axial Age the process of learning and knowledge production has been slowly acquiring an institutional form. Throughout the history of civilization institutions of higher learning and knowledge production took various shapes. For the limitations of this paper, we will only concentrate on some principal examples of such institutions. One of the earliest examples of an institution of higher learning comes from the territory of modern Pakistan. Just about 30 kilometers north-west of Islamabad lies the once flourishing center of Buddhist learning—Taxila (variously spelled as Taksasila). Some authors claim that a system of higher learning existed in Taxila at least since eighth century BC<sup>3</sup>. Joseph Needham states that "When the men of Alexander the Great came to Taxila in India in the fourth century BC they found a university there the like of which had not been seen in Greece."<sup>4</sup>

It can be disputed whether Taxila was similar to a full-fledged university, but it certainly had many features paralleling it. Multiple monasteries (*viharas*) of the city provided instruction in Buddhist philosophy, medicine, law and military sciences.<sup>5</sup> According to a prominent expert on Ancient India, Hartmut Scharfe, "Independent teachers or individual monks taught single individuals or small groups of students, even if they were part of a larger monastic institution, and perhaps even supervised by the monastic community at large."<sup>6</sup>

Another center of higher learning on the territory of the Indian subcontinent was the famous Nalanda in Bihar. Founded around the fifth or sixth century AD, it developed a network with other Buddhist monasteries: Vikramashila, Jaggadala, Somapura and Odantapura. Together they functioned akin to the modern university consortiums, facilitating exchange of scholars, knowledge and students.<sup>7</sup> Alongside traditional Buddhist philosophy, various disciplines such as medicine, logic and grammar were taught there.<sup>8</sup> Institutions of higher learning and knowledge production often have their origin in an organized system of beliefs. Taxila and Nalanda are just two of many examples worldwide. Such institutions perform various functions. They develop religious philosophy, legitimize and spread religious beliefs. However, despite the fact that the history of organized religions is intrinsically tied to the history of knowledge production, there are also other social interests that promote the development of higher learning.

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<sup>3</sup> Apte, D.G. (1900). *Universities in Ancient India*. Maharaja Sayajirao University, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Needham, Joseph (2004). *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West*. Routledge, 135.

<sup>5</sup> Mookerji, Radha Kumud (1989). *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist*. Motilal Banarsi das, 478-489.

<sup>6</sup> Scharfe, Hartmut (2002). *Education in Ancient India*. Brill, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Dutt, Sukumar (1962). *Buddhist Monks And Monasteries Of India: Their History And Contribution To Indian Culture*. George Allen and Unwin: 352-353.

<sup>8</sup> Altekar, Anant Sadashiv (1934). *Education in Ancient India*. Gyan Publishing House, 266.

Ancient China provides an example of higher learning institutions based on non-theistic knowledge systems. The first institutions of such kind were established already in fifteenth century BC.<sup>9</sup> Little is known about these institutions, except that they used to educate noble youth in various disciplines. A famous example of ancient Chinese education is the *Taixue* (or Imperial Academy), that was founded in 3 AD in Chang'an by the Emperor Ping of Han dynasty.<sup>10</sup> Its task was teaching candidates for the public service in Imperial China. *Taixue* was later substituted with *Guozijian* and *Guozixue*, similar institutions which existed in various guises up to the formation of the first modern university of China, the University of Beijing in 1898.

The principal difference of Chinese higher learning institutions was their practical orientation. Their objective was not to impart general knowledge to students, but rather to make them apt at performing principal public tasks. In this sense *Guozijian* was closer to modern schools of governance than to the traditional model of the university. A curious example from pre-Columbian America that testifies to the universal presence of higher learning in advanced civilizations is *Calmecac*, the Aztec schooling institution. It is arguable whether it can be properly considered an institution of higher learning, but the fact that it served as an alternative to the more conventional institution of *Telpochcalli* (a school giving instruction in military arts for lower social strata) and provided an entry point into the Aztec intellectual elite could certainly attest to the superior status of *Calmecac*. Another evidence of *Calmecac*'s superiority is its broader curriculum with advanced instruction in military arts, religious and intellectual aspects of Aztec life.<sup>11</sup>

Our narrative would hardly be complete without including an overview of higher learning and knowledge production in another great religion—Islam. Institutions of higher learning in the Middle East have a history predating that of Islam. The Academy of Gundishapur (also Jundishapur), founded in the late Antiquity by the Sassanid dynasty, is a particularly important example. The precise date of academy's foundation is not clear. However, it is known that when the School of Edessa was first purged and then closed by the Emperor Zeno in 489 AD, many of its scholars transferred to Gundishapur.<sup>12</sup> By the sixth-seventh century AD the school gained an excellent reputation throughout the medieval world as an important center of medical studies.<sup>13</sup>

The Greek influence was already predominant in Jundishapur when the closing of the Athenian school in 529 AD by order of the Byzantine emperor drove many learned Greek physicians to this town. A University with a medical school and a hospital were established by Khusraw Anushirwan the wise (531-579 AD) where the Greco-Syriac medicine blossomed. To this was added medical

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<sup>9</sup> Yuan, Zheng (1994). "Local Government Schools in Sung China: A Reassessment," *History of Education Quarterly* 34 (2), 193.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Aguilar Moreno, Manuel (2007). *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*. Oxford University Press, 98-99; 357-358.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, Andrew C. (2006). "Jundi-Shapur, bimaristans, and the rise of academic medical centres," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99 (12), 615.

<sup>13</sup> Prioreschi, Plinio (2001). *A History of Medicine: Byzantine and Islamic Medicine*. Horatius Press, 364.

knowledge from India brought by the physician vizier of Anushirwan called 'Burzuyah'.<sup>14</sup>

Although other disciplines were taught at Gundishapur, the school was specializing primarily in medical studies. A teaching hospital was an integral part of the school, which bears a striking resemblance to modern schools of medicine. The center of learning and knowledge production at Gundishapur persisted even after the Islamic conquest. Its tradition contributed to the development of the Islamic medicine, culminating in the works of Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Medical schools (teaching hospitals) played an important role in the Islamic realm during the Middle Age. Still, advanced Islamic scholarship was undoubtedly concentrated in the madrasah. It is at this institution that the various disciplines of the ancient world were taught. Initially, madrasah's curriculum focused on Islamic theology. As time passed by, it widened to include such disciplines as philosophy, mathematics, ethics, logics and law.

Not all of the madrasahs had a broad study curriculum or even taught at higher level. It is the biggest of those, called *jamiahs* that had the necessary resources to teach a broader set of subjects. In fact, the universal study orientation of some *jamiahs*, their specialized faculty, extensive facilities and degree-granting status led some scholars to compare them directly with the European university.<sup>15</sup> Wide objections, pointing to specific characteristics of the university in Europe led to the coinage of a particular term "Islamic university" to describe Islamic institutions of higher learning and knowledge production.<sup>16</sup>

Two most famous examples of madrasahs are the Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez and the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. The former, founded in 859 AD is considered by some to be the oldest university in the world. The range of subjects taught at the Al-Qarawiyyin University was quite broad. Alongside the study of Quran, it included philosophy, astronomy and mathematics.<sup>17</sup> Among its teachers and students were such important figures of the Muslim world as Al-Idrisi, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn al-Arabi and Leo Africanus.<sup>18</sup> According to Najjar, "The golden era of the Karaouine was in the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, that is, under the Almohades and throughout the reign of the Merinids [...] In those days the university attracted students not only from Africa and the Muslim world beyond, but even from Europe."<sup>19</sup>

The Al-Azhar University of Cairo shared a similar renown in medieval world. It was founded around 975 AD by the Fatimids, who promoted the study of foreign

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<sup>14</sup> Nagamia H. (2003). "Islamic medicine history and current practice," *Journal for the International Society for the History of Islamic Medicine* 2003 (2), 21.

<sup>15</sup> See Makdisi, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> See Burke, Edmund (2009). "Islam at the Center: Technological Complexes and the Roots of Modernity," *Journal of World History* 20 (2).

<sup>17</sup> Lulat, Y. (2005). *A History Of African Higher Education From Antiquity To The Present*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Landau, Rom (1968). *Afrique mauresque*. A. Michel, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Najjar, Fauzi M. (1958). "The Karaouine at Fez," *The Muslim World* 48 (2), 104.

knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the subjects that were taught at Al-Azhar included grammar, philosophy, logic, astronomy, jurisprudence, linguistics, and literary studies.<sup>21</sup> A controversy around the question whether the madrasahs could be compared to the European university concerns the legal status of Islamic institutions of higher learning. While the university was an autonomous corporation, madrasahs were often controlled by their rich patrons. According to Toby Huff, "From a structural and legal point of view, the madrasah and the university were contrasting types. Whereas the madrasah was a pious endowment under the law of religious and charitable foundations (*waqf*), the universities of Europe were legally autonomous corporate entities that had many legal rights and privileges".<sup>22</sup>

This distinction will come up continuously throughout the article. The reason of its importance is that it lies at the core of purported exceptionality of the European university. In accordance with this view, legal autonomy translates into academic autonomy, a distinguishing feature of occidental knowledge production.

Despite the dissimilarity of legal status, however, the university and the madrasah had many parallels. These, according to Hugh Goddard, included "practices such as delivering inaugural lectures, wearing academic robes, obtaining doctorates by defending a thesis, and even the idea of academic freedom [...]."<sup>23</sup>

### Pre-University Higher Learning in Europe

The European tradition of higher education can be traced to the period of Antiquity. Little is known about institutions of higher learning in pre-Socratic period. Pythagorean schools can be considered one such example, but they were neither properly institutionalized, nor really open to the public.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is the Plato's Academy that can be considered the first higher learning institution in the European Antiquity. According to Ellwood Cubberley, "In 386 B.C. he [Plato] founded the Academy, where he passed almost forty years in teaching and writing. His school, which formed a model for others, consisted of a union of teachers and students who possessed in common a chapel, library, lecture-rooms, and living-rooms. Philosophy, mathematics, and science were taught, and women as well as men were admitted."<sup>25</sup> Neither the content of teaching at the Academy nor the organization of its studies or academic ranks are quite clear. Most probably the early Academy was a space of gathering of like-minded people for the study of philosophy and mathematics through dialectic method.<sup>26</sup> It is likely that eventually the studies at the Academy became more organized and started to include various natural sciences.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> al-Magrizi quoted in Dodge, Bayard (1961). *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Learning*. The Middle East Institute, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Dodge, *op.cit.*, 17-19.

<sup>22</sup> Huff, *op.cit.*, 179.

<sup>23</sup> Goddard, Hugh (2000). *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Edinburgh University Press, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Thirlwall, Connop (1836). *A History of Greece*. Longmans, 147-148.

<sup>25</sup> Cubberley, Ellwood P. (2004). *The History of Education*. Kessinger Publishing, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Nails, Debra (2002). *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics*. Hackett, 248.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes, Jonathan (2000). *Aristotle: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 33.

Sometime after the establishment of the Plato's Academy, other philosophical schools were set-up in or around Athens. It is now customary to distinguish four main institutions of higher learning in the Classical Greece. Besides the already mentioned Academy, these included Aristotle's Lyceum (335 or 334 BC), the Garden of Epicurus (307 or 306 BC) and Stoa Poikile or Stoic school (301 BC). Each institution specialized in teaching their respective doctrines, and rarely interacted with other schools.

The history of Ancient Greek higher learning is intrinsically related to the history of Ancient Greece itself. The Academy, for example, was closed and revived several times. During the First Mithridatic War, Sulla, after a long siege of Athens, completely obliterated both the Lyceum and the Academy.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, major schools were revived continuously during the period of Antiquity until being finally closed by the order of the Emperor Justinian I in 529 AD. In his wider attempt to uniform religion within his Empire Justinian prohibited any "pagan" teaching, which was suspected to be at odds with Christian faith.

The demise of classical institutions of higher learning and knowledge production signified the onset of a new era. The spread of Christian religion required educated clergy to service various needs of the Church. With "pagan" schools banned, a new organization of learning was desperately needed. Under these conditions largest monasteries and cathedrals undertook the function of educating vast realms of Christendom. Depending on their respective origins these new educational institutions were called monastic or cathedral schools.

The earliest of monastic and cathedral schools were established somewhere between fifth and sixth centuries AD and, initially, had a rather limited curriculum.<sup>29</sup> A notable exception is the school established by the Roman public servant Flavius Magnus Cassiodorus in 537 AD at Vivarium. Cassiodorus developed a special curriculum of studies, called *Institutiones* that involved both religious and secular texts.<sup>30</sup> The first part of the curriculum dealt primarily with a body of Christian theological works, while the second part established foundations of liberal scholastic studies: Trivium, including grammar, logic and rhetoric, and Quadrivium, including arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. The disciplines of the second part of *Institutiones* were regarded by Cassiodorus as auxiliary to the studies of theology.<sup>31</sup> This curriculum of studies would later be borrowed by other schools and eventually by the first universities.

Over the next centuries, monastic and cathedral schools were established throughout many medieval cities: Canterbury (597 AD), Rochester (604 AD), York (627 AD), Beverley (700 AD), Muenster (797 AD), Osnabruck (804 AD), Roskilde (980 AD) etc. Charlemagne's Admonitio Generalis of 789 AD decreed schools to be established in

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<sup>28</sup> Plutarch (1916). *Parallel Lives*. Vol. IV. Loeb Classical Library, 363.

<sup>29</sup> Riche, Pierre (1976). *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West, Sixth through Eighth Centuries*. University of South Carolina Press, 100-105.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 158-169.

<sup>31</sup> Halporn, James W. and Mark Vessey (2004). *Cassiodorus: Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning and On the Soul*. Liverpool University Press, 68.

every monastery and episcopal residence.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence, every major city soon had a monastic or cathedral school. One of these schools was formed around the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Later on this school was to become one of the first universities of Europe. The overview of various institutions of higher learning and knowledge production presented in the first two sections show that many characteristics that we tend to associate with the institution of university could already be found in earlier institutions of knowledge production. However, to understand better the particularities of the European university, it is essential to analyze the historical and socio-political context of its emergence.

### The Birth of the European University

The earliest universities have quite different origins. The University of Bologna that often claims to be the first one in Europe sprang from a loose association of legal scholars and was chartered by Frederick I Barbarossa in 1158, with the original foundation date traditionally considered to be 1088.<sup>33</sup> Legal studies in Bologna go back for about a century prior to the foundation of the university itself. Italian libraries had already been important for legal scholarship when the discovery of *Justinian Digest*, a major compilation of Roman works on jurisprudence, made it the primary destination for anyone wishing to study law.<sup>34</sup> It was in Bologna that the first exposition of compiled *Justinian Digest* was given. According to Stein, "The first law teacher at Bologna was said to be a causidicus, or consultant judge, called Pepo, in the last decades of the eleventh century [...] Whatever Pepo's claims to have taught Justinian's law, it was Irnerius who marked the separation between the science of law and the practice of law. [...] Irnerius was thus the first of a line of doctors at Bologna, known, from their characteristic method of expounding the texts, as the glossators."<sup>35</sup>

Bologna's fame as a center of legal learning brought many students to the city. Particularities of Italian municipal law applied to all the foreigners the principle of shared responsibility. That meant that any person from British Isles, for example, was responsible for legal obligations of any of his compatriots. A debt incurred by one person would have been shouldered by the whole foreign community if this person was unable to pay. This pushed foreigners studying in Bologna to unite into "nations," based on their geographic origin. Eventually, two major nation groups emerged amalgamating countries belonging either to the European North or to the European South. Each of these groups was legally incorporated as a "universitas"—a body of fellows under municipal law.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Text in Latin can be found on the website of Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft: <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/0000/bsb00000820/images/index.html?id=00000820&seite=64> (accessed 12/03/2012)

<sup>33</sup> Gaston, Paul (2010). *The Challenge of Bologna*. Stylus, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Stein, Peter (1999). *Roman Law in European History*. Cambridge University Press , 43-45.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>36</sup> Berman, Harold J. (1983). *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. Harvard University Press, 124.

The virtues of incorporation were obvious to the students of Bologna, teenagers who by medieval standards were mature young men ready for an active political life. United, they could bargain effectively with the city government and also dominate the administration of the school. [...] The student universitas, or corporation, or guild received from the city of Bologna a charter which permitted it to make contracts with the professors, to regulate the rents of student lodgings, to determine the kinds of courses to be taught and the material to be covered in each, to set the length of lectures and the number of holidays, to regulate prices for the rent and sale of books. The professors were paid directly by the students in their respective classes.<sup>37</sup>

The only university that could contend Bologna's claim of antecedence is the University of Paris. Its origin can be traced back to a cathedral school founded on the Île de la Cité sometime around tenth century AD. By that time Paris could already boast a number of educational institutions, including private ones. According to Gabriel, "From 1100 Paris becomes the rival of most famous French schools: Chartres, Laon, Reims, etc. [...] At the beginning of the twelfth century, most celebrated schools can be found in Paris, and not in monastic centers but in the shadow of the monastery and on the square of Notre-Dame. The episcopal schools offered a great advantage to their pupils that being the freedom to choose their own tutor."<sup>38</sup>

The cathedral of Notre-Dame was to grow into an important center of Christian learning. Guillaume de Champeaux and his student Pierre Abelard were among many famous tutors at the school in twelfth century. Ironically enough, the gradual decline of the Notre-Dame school began in the same century. During the late twelfth and early thirteenth century scholars of the cathedral schools of Île de la Cité started to migrate to the left bank of Seine. This was caused on one hand by a lack of space for teaching and student lodging, and on the other by a conflict between teachers (maîtres) and the chancellor of the school who attempted to levy taxes on teaching licenses. Repelled by this practice, many liberal arts scholars moved to the rival Sainte-Genevieve abbey.<sup>39</sup> They founded a corporation, which, eventually, was recognized as legal scholarly community by Philip II Augustus in 1200.<sup>40</sup> The University of Paris was thus born.

The principal difference between the universities established in Paris and Bologna was the issue of corporate control. The University of Paris, which was established by rogue maîtres of church schools, was primarily faculty-led. The University of Bologna, established by students from different parts of Europe, was entirely student-controlled. This entailed countless differences in the university organization and administration. It might be hard to envisage nowadays, but the student-led university corporations once were quite spread in Europe. It is only after the rise of modern nation states that the faculty-led model of the university gradually overtook the student-led one.

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<sup>37</sup> Harold, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Gabriel, Astrik L. (1964). "Les écoles de la cathédrale de Notre-Dame et le commencement de l'université de Paris," *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 50 (147), 80 (translation by the author).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

<sup>40</sup> It is probable that the corporation of scholars has already existed in 1170 (see Rashdall, *op. cit.*, 294).

The difference of organizational structure, however, should not mask the similarities of legal status. The universities of Paris and Bologna were full-fledged medieval corporations. Although the former arose from an ecclesiastic tradition while the latter from the civil one, they both had a very similar status in the medieval society. The core of this status was the legal autonomy of the university from other corporations, which in practice meant the right to self-governance.

### **Expansion and Evolution of the University Model.**

During the Middle Age, more and more universities sprang up around the European continent. The origins of the first universities are dissimilar, although the initial impulse came either from scholars looking for better fortunes or from political authorities. The first university of the English speaking world, the University of Oxford (1167 AD), originated from a murky political situation when foreigners were banned from attending the University of Paris by Henry II. Its famous rival, the University of Cambridge (1209 AD), was in turn the result of a mass exodus of scholars from Oxford due to a conflict between the townsfolk and the university's scholars. The University of Naples had a different origin. It is a prime example of a university established for political reasons. Frederick II decreed to establish a university in Naples in 1224, as an alternative to the University of Bologna, which was located in the unfriendly Papal States.<sup>41</sup>

In medieval Europe, having a university was a sort of prestige, but also a political advantage. In 1348 Charles IV established the University of Prague, the first university in Central and Eastern Europe close to his power base in Bohemia. The colonization of Americas brought the export of the European higher education model overseas. The first university in the New World, the University of San Marcos, was established in 1551 in what is now Peru by a royal decree of Charles V. In the same year the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico was founded in North America. By the end of seventeenth century Europe alone had more than a hundred universities. The highest concentrations of universities at that time could be found in German territories, Italian lands, France and Spain respectively.<sup>42</sup> By the end of nineteenth century there were hundreds of universities spanning every continent of the globe, except for the Antarctic. The university had prevailed as the dominant institution of higher education and knowledge production in the world.

Two important developments in the history of the university can be identified at this stage. The first of these events is the so-called Recovery of Aristotle.<sup>43</sup> Highly rational and naturalistic thought of Aristotle influenced the direction of scholarly inquiry in medieval universities and undermined traditional educational orthodoxy.<sup>44</sup> Some authors even consider that the very idea of the scholarly autonomy was born out of

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<sup>41</sup> Rudy, Willis (1984). *The Universities of Europe, 1100-1914*. Associated University Presses, 27-28.

<sup>42</sup> Frijhoff, W. (1996). "Patterns," *A history of the university in Europe, Volume II: Universities in early modern Europe, 1500-1800*. Ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens. Cambridge University Press, 104.

<sup>43</sup> Dod, Bernard (1982). "Aristotles Latinus," *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100-1600*. Eds. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, Eleonore Stump. Cambridge University Press, 45-79.

<sup>44</sup> Huff, *op.cit.*, 185; 235-236

hard battles waged between those who wanted to introduce Aristotle to the university and their conservative opponents.<sup>45</sup>

Another watershed moment for the university's history is the advent of a new paradigm of higher education in the nineteenth century. This paradigm was based on the ideas of the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Prussian scholar and minister of education Wilhelm von Humboldt. They envisioned a model with a high level of university independence from the state, close interaction between the student and his tutor, and applied character of the university education.<sup>46</sup>

Von Humboldt is credited with the further development of the idea of "academic autonomy"<sup>47</sup>—the independence of university's scholarship from immediate political context. Humboldt's model was first utilized to create the University of Berlin in 1810. Since then it has been borrowed worldwide and has profoundly influenced the system of higher education and research.<sup>48</sup>

### The University in Comparison

After the historical overview of the previous sections, we can now discuss the alleged singularity of the European university. Various formal characteristics and operational practices were suggested as its distinctive features. However, the quest for exceptionalism proved to be a tedious undertaking. Although many scholars have argued that the university is a typical European phenomenon<sup>49</sup>, we have seen that there were a great many similarities between the university and other institutions of knowledge production. These similarities include the training of civil and religious elites, the teaching of various disciplines, as well as the presence of specialized facilities and professional scholars.

However, there are also other particularities often attributed to the European university, such as the right of formal certification, the variety of specializations, and, most importantly, legal and academic autonomy. The singularity of the above-mentioned characteristics is disputable to a large extent. The history of certification predates the institution of the university for centuries. Already in Imperial China the institutions of *Taixue* were preparing their students for examinations to receive *jinshi*, the degree allowing the applicant to enter public service.<sup>50</sup> Certification was also present in Islamic colleges, and there are opinions that the very origin of the European doctorates date

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<sup>45</sup> Perry, Marvin, Myrna Chase, Margaret C. Jacob and James R. Jacob (2008). *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics, and Society*. Cengage Learning, 261-262.

<sup>46</sup> Fallon, Daniel. (1980). *The German University: A Heroic Ideal in Conflict with the Modern World*. Colorado Associated University Press, 10-20.

<sup>47</sup> Scott, J. C. (2006). "The mission of the university: Medieval to Postmodern transformations," *Journal of Higher Education* 77 (1), 20.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>49</sup> For an elaboration of this argument see, for example, outstanding volumes on the history of university edited by Walter Rüegg, and Hilde Ridder-Symoens (Ridder-Symoens, *op. cit*; Rüegg, *op. cit*), and another volume on the European university written by Nuria Sanz and Sjur Bergan (Sanz, Bergan, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> See Rongzeng, Wu et al. (1992). "Taixue," *Zhongguo da baike quanshu, Zhongguo lishi, Volume II*. Zhongguo da baike quanshu chubanshe, 1083-1084.

back to the practices of madrasahs.<sup>51</sup> The procedure for obtaining an equivalent of the European doctorate also seems to be quite similar between the two institutions.<sup>52</sup> Academic specialization is more peculiar to the European university. Originally, medieval universities provided training in three broad fields: medicine, law and theology. However, the claim that it is an exclusive characteristic of the university is simply not true. Some of the madrasahs taught not only Islamic law and theology, but also medicine.<sup>53</sup> And although we lack a lot of information about the actual specializations in other institutions of higher learning, in-depth studies of various disciplines and medical traditions at Gundishapur, as well as separate examinations for military and civil servants in Imperial China may suggest a possible system of specialties.

In sum, there are few characteristics that are exclusive to the European university. Stavros Moutsios, after making a historical comparison of various higher learning institutions, comes to a similar conclusion. He states that "neither chronology, nor study programs, nor formal certification, nor the training of administrative and professional elites justify the conception of the university as a European institution".<sup>54</sup> The only distinction that seems to distinguish the European university is the already mentioned particularity of its legal status. Unlike other similar institutions, the university was incorporated as a legal body under the medieval law. This peculiarity, however, seems to have little influence on its actual performance compared to that of other similar institutions. Both the university and its peer organizations were subjected to strict controls of their respective socio-political systems.

In general perception, however, the distinction between legal and academic autonomy tends to be quite blurred. The fact that university is a distinct legal body in social interactions with the right for self-governance is often considered enough to aver the independence of the university scholarship from its political environment. After the scientific revolution and the advent of the Humboldtian model, the idea of university's independence got firmly entrenched in public imagination. Legal autonomy, however, does not necessarily translate into academic autonomy, which is a point that seems to be overlooked both in popular and academic literature.

### The University and Academic Autonomy

The idea of academic autonomy pervades in various guises an extensive body of work on the European university.<sup>55</sup> Moutsios, despite emphasizing similarities between the university and other institutions, states that "what distinguishes the European university fundamentally from similar institutions created in other parts of the world is academic autonomy".<sup>56</sup> From his point of view, academic autonomy is "the potential of the university members to set their own rules, as individuals and as an academic

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<sup>51</sup> See Makdisi, *op. cit.*

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See Gibb, H. A. R. (1970), "The University in the Arab-Moslem World", in Bradby, Edward, *The University Outside Europe: Essays on the Development of University*. Ayer Publishing, 1970.

<sup>54</sup> Moutsios, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> See Ridder-Symoens *op. cit.*; Rüegg *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Moutsios, *op. cit.*, 6.

community, with respect to scholarly inquiry, learning and the governance of their institution.<sup>57</sup> While the university is indeed a self-governing institution to a certain extent, content of its learning and direction of its scholarly inquiry has often been determined by the will and the dynamics of the socio-political system.

Albeit legally autonomous, the university is hardly more independent in its academic practices than other institutions of knowledge production. It does not mean that scholars working at various universities are necessarily restricted in exercising their job and stating their opinion. In fact there are many critical voices that satisfy public demand for various strands of thought. Restrictions arise rather from the way in which the socio-political system works. It is on this level that those who are critical of accepted paradigms of knowledge are either marginalized or face the outright wrath of system's gatekeepers. To elucidate this point, let us revisit the main stages in the development of the European university.

The University of Paris, decreed by Philip II Augustus in 1200, was put under direct authority of the Church.<sup>58</sup> Its students and professors were treated as clergy; its organization and curriculum were decreed by papal bulls.<sup>59</sup> The situation at the University of Bologna, a legal entity since 1158, was somewhat different. It was however still directly accountable to the authority of the Church, since it was under direct jurisdiction of the Papal States. The incorporation of universities certainly gave them a wider space to maneuver in the medieval society. Nevertheless, they were far from being independent from dominant social and political trends.

An early example of restrictions that medieval universities were facing is the "Condemnations of 1210-1277". The recovery of Aristotle brought to light many ideas contradicting some of the basic teachings of the Church. As a reaction the teaching of Aristotle was prohibited at the University of Paris. According to a passage from *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, "Neither the books of Aristotle on natural philosophy nor their commentaries are to be read at Paris in public or secret, and this we forbid under penalty of excommunication."<sup>60</sup> Thomas Aquinas eventually reconciled the teachings of Aristotle with the doctrine of the Church, which brought Aristotle back to medieval universities.<sup>61</sup>

The age of scientific revolution once again exposed the conservatism of the universities in Europe. As Richard Westfall noted, "in 1600, the universities gathered within their walls a group of highly trained intellectuals who were less apt to welcome the appearance of modern science than to regard it as a threat both to sound philosophy and to inspired religion."<sup>62</sup> And this time Aristotelianism was one of the main obstacles to the acceptance of new ideas.

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<sup>57</sup> Moutsios, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Verger, Jacques (1995). *Les Universités françaises au Moyen Âge*. E.J. Brill, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Denifle, H. and E. Chatelain (1889). *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*. Delalain, 136-139.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Thorndike, Lynn (1944). *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*. University of Columbia Press, 26-27.

<sup>61</sup> Perry, Chase, Jacob and Jacob, *op. cit.*, 261-262.

<sup>62</sup> Westfall, R. S. (1977). *The construction of modern science: mechanisms and mechanics*. Cambridge University Press, 106.

The ideas of Aristotle fitted well with the teachings of the Church. The geocentric model corresponded to the idea of mankind as a centerpiece of creation. Alternatives to mainstream theories were not well taken. Biographies of such figures as Galileo Galilei evidence clearly to the conservatism of medieval universities, and their unwillingness to contradict the Church. According to Westfall, "With the exception of some doctors, virtually none of the leading scientists held university chairs, and the scientific revolution was created more despite the universities than because of them."<sup>63</sup> The traditionalism of the universities led many scholars to conduct their research in alternative institutions, such as emerging scientific societies.<sup>64</sup>

The growth of capitalism and the rise of the nation states somewhat changed the orientation of the European universities. With traditional forms of authority displaced, the university finally got a breath of fresh air. At this point of time, however, the control over the organization and content of universities' teachings was simply passing from one authority to another. According to Hastings Rashdall, "universities throughout Europe in the course of the fifteenth century tended in the same direction—towards the nationalization of Paris as of all other universities."<sup>65</sup> Over the course of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries universities were gradually integrated into the modern state. New, more sophisticated mechanisms of control were created to assure the university's compliance to dominant socio-political interests.

The state control over universities was exercised through various means, including financing, administration, and certification. The loss of private financial resources of the universities was a gradual process extending from the late Middle Age to the twentieth century. It involved complete or partial loss of original endowments that the universities had. According to Paul Gerbod, "In less than a century and a half from the end of the French Revolution to the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, almost all university establishments, some earlier and some more radically than others, reached the stage where they lost their financial independence."<sup>66</sup> As a result, many nation states started to finance their universities. The state funding of the university, ironically, came at a cost.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, strict administrative controls were established over universities. Ministries of education were set up to oversee learning in general and higher learning in particular. Appointments of the university's administration were now handled by state bureaucracy. In some countries even appointments to professorship became an exclusive domain of the state.

A related mechanism of control was the introduction of educational standards. They allowed the state to control the smallest aspects of higher education. Students and professors alike now had to undergo various examinations set in line with the

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<sup>63</sup> Westfall, *op. cit.*, 107.

<sup>64</sup> Ornstein, M. (1928). *The role of scientific societies in the seventeenth century*. University of Chicago Press, 298-304.

<sup>65</sup> Rashdall, *op. cit.*, 553.

<sup>66</sup> Gerbod, Paul (2004). "Relations with Authority," *A History of the University in Europe. Volume III: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800-1945)*. Ed. Walter Rüegg. Cambridge University Press, 84.

discretions of the state. This involved corresponding changes of curriculum and internal organization of universities. John Scott commented on this tendency that "[In the early modern universities] the newly consolidated state began to increase visitations, intervention, regulation (curriculum, subjects taught, and publications allowed), and appointment of chancellors."<sup>67</sup>

Where indirect controls did not suffice, nation states could always resort to their monopoly on violence. Famous examples of such actions are the university purges in France in the nineteenth century, which involved, among others, the dismissals of François Guizot and Victor Cousin.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the Russian tsarist government subjected universities to occasional purges throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.<sup>69</sup> In Prussia the king issued in 1819 an order that individuals posing ideological danger to the state should not be tolerated within the universities.<sup>70</sup> Gerbod noted in this respect that "State interference in the functioning of the universities and schools thus intensified. As a result, university autonomy diminished during the nineteenth century."<sup>71</sup>

The rise of communism and the division of the world in two political blocs saw an extreme polarization of universities along ideological lines. The two superpowers ardently battled "subversive ideas" in their influence zones. Ideologically unfit university intellectuals were marginalized discriminated or purged by their respective overseers. Examples here are numerous in both ideological blocks.<sup>72</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union and the triumph of the capitalist system once again seemed to grant the universities much coveted ideal of academic autonomy. What was less obvious is that the institution of the university again changed hands. The modern states had to grapple with the recent consequences of a liberalized free market, which, like a large black hole, sucked almost every social relation in its orbit. And it is the will and the dynamics of the market that became a decisive factor in what the university does. The changing place of the university was once again the weather vane of changing socio-political realities.

It is still early to discern the degree of control that the market has over the contemporary university, as it will become clearer only in retrospect. However, there are multiple indicators of market impact over the last decades. These indicators include the prioritization of the STEM disciplines and the decreased funding for social sciences

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<sup>67</sup> Scott, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Gerbod, *op. cit.*, 97.

<sup>69</sup> Flynn, James T. (1971). "Magnitskii's Purge of Kazan University: A Case Study in the Uses of Reaction in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *The Journal of Modern History* 43 (4), 598-614; Whittaker, Cynthia (1978). "From Promise to Purge: The First Years of St. Petersburg University," *Paedagogica Historica* 18 (1), 148-167.

<sup>70</sup> Pinkard, Terry (2001). *Hegel: A Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 440.

<sup>71</sup> Gerbod, *op. cit.*, 121.

<sup>72</sup> See Ellen Schrecker's research on effects of McCarthyism on United States' universities (Schrecker, Ellen W. (1986). *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*. Oxford University Press), or John Connely's account of purges in Eastern Block Universities (Connelly, John (2000). *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956*. University of North Carolina Press, 126-141).

and humanities, the corporatization of the university's boards and the growing separation between academic and managerial staff, the increasing reliance on market funding of research projects, the pressures to produce marketable research results, and to focus on labor markets in determining educational offer.

### **Conclusion**

The European university does not seem to have had many special characteristics in comparison with other institutions of higher learning and knowledge production. The analysis has shown that many features that the university had were already present in other similar organizations throughout the world and historical epochs. The only peculiarity that distinguishes the university is its legal autonomy that purportedly developed into "academic autonomy"—the independence of university's scholarship from immediate socio-political conditions. After analyzing this idea in detail, the paper comes to the conclusion that the autonomy of the university is strongly exaggerated. For most of its history the university was subject to social and political control. The content of its learning and research was often adjusted or directly mandated to suit dominant socio-political paradigms. In the Middle Age its teachings were censured by the Church, and in the modern times the state took up the controlling function. The contemporary university, in turn, is firmly entrenched in the market dominated social system.

All this does not imply that the university does not have any degree of autonomy. Indeed, there are many ways in which independent knowledge pursuits can flourish within universities, but the university is not independent from the socio-political environment. Thus, the argument that the European university is different in this respect from other institutions of knowledge production does not hold well. The reason why the idea of the university as an autonomous organization is so pervasive is, perhaps, to grant it a certain rhetorical power. Without this idea the university would be just a community of scholars for hire. It is through this idea that the knowledge produced at the university is legitimized. Taking into account that this knowledge is often beneficial for the system, the university plays an integrative role in maintaining cohesion of a dominant social system. This cohesion, however, often comes at the cost of discouraging knowledge that might contradict the basic postulates of dominant social ideologies.

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