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“The Idea of a University”, its Spiritual-Humanitarian Values and Content

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Abstract

The article considers the changes taking place in a contemporary university under the influence of globalization processes. The authors note the following contradiction: on the one hand, according to the logic of globalization processes, “the idea of a university” today must assume a purpose to ensure a new world linguistic, cultural and national order. What choice lies in store for a university if it cannot ignore globalization processes and, at the same time, it cannot give up its national spiritual distinctiveness? A solution of the contradiction is linked to a search for new forms of existence of culture and spirituality as a humanitarian component of the university’s life and the content of its “idea”. The contemporary “idea of a university” finds itself in the unity of universal and individual, global and local.

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1. Introduction

Is there a need for and a possibility of speaking about preserving the classical “idea of a university” in the conditions of a culture that is characterized in terms of “rhizome” (Deleuze, Guattari, 2005), “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2006), constant “transition” (Smirnov, 2014), crisis and “chaos”? Has the very notion of “the idea of a university” been retained in philosophy and practice of university education? Questions of this kind arise in connection with those changes that have taken place under conditions of globalization in the world in general and

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including changes in educational practice. One can answer these questions in the tonality of nostalgia but the very fact that these questions are set shows that they are initiated not accidentally. These questions are linked to the traditionally spiritual content of “the idea of a university”, the spiritual character of the knowledge and the truth that have become the specific emblem of the university but which are becoming today less noticeable.

The “idea of a university” in its spiritual content was formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt. His formulation proceeded from his philosophical directions and was based on his teaching about the “Volkgeist”, elevating to which, as to an enlightening source, was the purpose of education. The “idea of a university” contained in itself the specific character of the nation’s spiritual state, provided the national and personal identity and formed a person’s spirituality in its concrete national content. However, what national content one may speak about today, and which people’s spirituality can represent the content of the “idea of a university” if ethnic groups, peoples and nations find themselves drawn into the common and single area of globalization? National identity and, correspondingly, the “spirit of the people” undergo profound changes in globalization inter-exchanges and communicative “space of flows” (Castells, 2004). Both the concept and practice of ethno-national development undergo a change, the ethnic, “native”, language is problematized, and possibilities arise of forming the global language, global culture and, therefore, “global spirit”.

Therefore, it is impossible to give an unambiguous positive answer at present to the questions that were posed above. The reality attests to blurring the borderlines of a single national identity, which is replaced by a “multiple identity”, multilingualism, multiculturalism and “multispirituality”. All this, of course, poses the question about the “the idea of a university” traditional spiritual-humanitarian content in a new way. Obviously, the contemporary university and its “idea”, if they are preserved, assume the purpose of ensuring a new world linguistic, cultural and national order. Will this order be a triumph of contemporary Anglo-Saxon English or its new language variety, which will forego its ethnocentrism and emerge as the universal language used for overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers? Will spirituality be retained (and if “yes”, then what national image will it take) as the content of the “idea of a university”? Will this spirituality be the spirituality of “situational”, “contextual” or “multiple” national identity? So far, answers to these questions present an open prospect for research. But, in any case, all of them are linked to new existence forms of the university’s culture, its spirituality, and its “idea”; all of them lead us to the notion of the common world communicative area, in which the contemporary university finds itself. What choice does the university face if it cannot but take into account the conditions of the world undergoing globalization and, at the same time, it cannot give up its national spiritual distinctiveness? It is in a controversial unity of universal and individual, global and local that the contemporary “idea of a university” presents itself. From what positions and in which methodological key can one speak today about the “idea of a university”? The present article addresses as its major research problem the comprehension and resolution of this contradiction. The object of research is the “idea of a university” in its spiritual content. The aim of the article is to research into the form of preserving/non-preserving spirituality as a content characteristic of the “idea of a university” in conditions of contemporary globalization processes.

2. Globalization and changes of the “idea of a university”

In the contemporary globalizing world, essence-based changes of spirituality (it is the same whether the meaning if this notion is religious, in which case spirituality is understood as communication with the Holy Spirit, or it is philosophical, when spirituality is identified as rationality of thinking) and, therefore, changes of the spiritual aura of the contemporary university, of its “idea”, which is spiritual in its content, are the reality. And again the questions arise: do these changes speak about the rejection by the university of its “idea” or do they testify to this “idea” assuming another form that is relevant to new socio-cultural conditions? If, however, the “idea of a university” remains, then does it retain its traditionally spiritual content?

We will proceed from the following hypothesis. Traditionally, the “idea of a university” has always been associated with the production and cognition of scientific truth. It was this understanding that initiated not only the gnoseological direction of the “idea” but its spiritual filling. The fact is that since the times of antiquity truth in philosophy was understood in unity with its humanitarian (spiritual) context. In such understanding, it prepared historical, cultural and epistemological prerequisites for the emergence of the university in the specific character of its idea’s humanitarian content.
Prerequisites for humanitarian accompaniment of truth were also formed in ancient Greek philosophy. They consisted in that when truth became the property of rational reasoning, and being the result of the work of Logos/Reason it had access to what was not manifested on the surface in the multitude of solitary objects but was hidden in the depth of entity, the universal. It is already in this identification of truth with the universal beginning that its etymological unity with that organizational form that subsequently manifested itself as the University can be seen. Really, truth as universality sanctioned both the birth of the university and its “idea”. But if universality were the only characteristic of truth, then the university that grew on it and the “idea of a university” addressed to it would have nothing to do with what we are talking about. Such truth, having formed the “idea of a university”, could not have created its specifically humanitarian content as a special, highly spiritual, atmosphere of the university.

However, the “idea of a university” is growing not only on the universality of truth, even though on it as well. In its universality, truth taken over by the “idea of a university” did not appear neutral in character but always had relation to “goodness” (“Arete”). It opened itself only to those who had or strove to have self-control, who “took care” of their souls, who wielded power over themselves. The soul, as it was understood by Greeks, is namely Reason, and caring about the soul was identified with caring about Reason. Already Socrates connected the soul of a person not with reason in general, but with reason that is morally oriented. Plato in his philosophical discussions about the “world or realm of opinions” and the “world or realm of truth” as well as in teaching in his Academy spoke about and conducted a practical course “On Goodness”. “Goodness”, “virtue” (“Arete”), which characterize knowledge and cognition, are the necessary components of antique truth. Only they impart to people and their soul-reason a state of happiness and perfection. It is these components that introduce the humanitarian-spiritual component into the reasonable strictness and logically purified content of truth.

In Ancient Greece, of course, there was no university. But didn’t Antique Philosophy create preconditions for universities which appeared later to take up High Truth, uniting in itself Good and Beauty, as an educational reference point? The echo of the antique call for the High is already found in the culture of Middle Ages, which initiated the creation of the university at that time as a cultural-educational institute. Knowledge and Truth, genetically idea-based categories of the university, become its historically beautiful emblem, elevating all those concerned in it. Gradually, a universal, and also beautiful and elevated “idea of a university” was formed. It, in its turn, determined the university’s High Humanitarian Idea and Mission.

In antique times, humanitarian theoretical-philosophical premises on which the university was established were embodied in the Academy (of Plato), lyceums, gardens, gymnasiuums and schools. In later times, there was a multitude of schools (the Magnaura school in Constantinople, Christian cathedral schools etc.), directly from which emerged European universities. The universities of Bologna, Paris and Oxford (11th - 12th centuries) as well as the universities of Cambridge, Salamanca and Montpelier, Padua, Naples, Vienna, Krakow, Toulouse, Heidelberg, Leipzig, Basel - all of them came out of monasteries, and all retained in themselves their spiritual content.

Thus, the ideals of Universal Reason directed at cognition of truth in unity with the ethical and aesthetic beginning, formed the “idea of a university”. Its main characteristic is a monopoly over the development of science and a search for the Single and Absolute Truth which was thought as a theoretical expression of the objective world but opened itself only to reason, which combined rationally checked out, logical moves and methods with Goodness, Good and Beauty. The “idea of a university”, having acquired truth in this characteristic, has bound itself to fundamental, highly theoretical knowledge, loaded with humanitarian, spiritual beginning. It was “knowledge not for use but for understanding” (Aristotle). The “idea of a university”, therefore, manifested itself in a humanist and in humanitarian views: knowledge and education, as it was considered, exist for the sake of pleasure and esthetical enjoyment, as a value in itself.

However, what has happened to the “idea of a university” today, when preconditions that made for its development have changed their form? First of all, the notion of truth has changed. In the course of history, it has experienced a period when it lost in its content that humanitarian context that it had inherited. Truth is objective, and in achieving it one must not “cry or laugh” (Spinoza). In globalization processes of contemporaneity, the truth is suggested not to ignore the effects of the cultural background, mental, world outlook and other contexts. Situationality, contextuality, interpretationality, relativity and “hermeneutic grafting” (Paul Ricoer) - all these have become characteristic for scientific truth and led to the destruction of its classical principles of unambiguousness, eternity and absoluteness of its cultural meanings, canons, ideals, norms and patterns of development. But the
contexts themselves have also changed.

First of all, the university’s social environment has changed, in which it has lost its monopoly and privileged position of a scientific-educational center and institution, where new knowledge is created and where introducing to it takes place. In information society or in “knowledge society”, many specialized research institutes have been established, which on the basis of information technologies offer their scientific and educational services and their forms of searching for truth. The university has found itself in the conditions of stiff competitive struggle with other educational and scientific institutions. Certainly, under these conditions, a pragmatist idea at the foundation of the “Idea of a university”, undermining the classical understanding of truth with its rich humanitarian content, could not but assert itself. As a result, utilitarianism is entering education, whose task becomes “to rear the ‘current’ men possible, ‘current’ being used here in the sense in which it is applied to the coin of the realm” (Friedrich Nietzsche). The “idea of a university” could not but react to these changes.

If truth and knowledge remain, as before, the “idea” on which the university works, then it is already different truth and different knowledge: they bear the seal of globalization processes, intercultural interactions and scientific communications. In creating the new world order in the field of language and culture as a whole, including education and science, tradition is going as a mechanism of social development. Tradition is replaced with innovation, which in becoming this mechanism assumes new principles of social development. Instead of stability, eternity and absoluteness, the new principles are based on movement and a constant change. The university is no longer in a stable space that has been firmly established to last for centuries but it finds itself in the “confusion” and disorderliness of the “space of flows” (Manuel Castells). “Chaos” has become “order”.

In such a world, the only principle to hold on and not get swept away and lost in the “chaos” is the principle to be the best, greatest and powerful - the principle of pragmatism. The paradigm of the university that is free and developing measuredly on the basis of a humanitarian-spiritual idea, which focuses its attention on its originality and distinctiveness in the network of other scientific and educational institutions, is going as a consequence of lack of demand since the very idea of originality, i.e. of humanitarian content and humanitarian accompaniment of the university education as a whole, is becoming a thing of the past. It is going, ascertaining that there is a crisis of ethnocultural identity and emergence of the global culture; it is going from the language, bringing about the language of global communication; it is going from the “idea of a university” as well because changes in language and culture and their expulsion in a classical form is, at the same time, expulsion of humanitarianism and spirituality.

Pragmatism as a principle of survival in the contemporary world of science and education, and, first of all, in the university, manifests itself in that knowledge and truth, which make up the traditional content of the “idea of a university”, have acquired a market value and become a commodity. The university lives according to the rules of a market, where it is pragmatics that reign and where commercialization and competitive struggle dominate.

What answer must be given to the question posed at the beginning of this article concerning a possibility of and a necessity for preserving the “idea of a university” in the conditions of the globalization of information society? It must be acknowledged that it certainly cannot be preserved in its classical forms, as it was formulated by Humboldt. But it does not vanish, either. It is getting transformed, retaining its high, enlightening purpose in forms that are relevant to the contemporary state of science, knowledge and sociocultural reality.

Actually, the pragmatist transformations of the university made it see, alongside with fundamental and highly theoretical scientific truth, the significance and market value of applied and utilitarian knowledge, which led to lowering it in the contest of pragmatist necessity. But it must be noted that the very notion of scientific knowledge fundamentality has changed nowadays. Firstly, it has acquired a sign of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity of science is its new fundamental state, expressing communicative coupling and intertwining of various fields of scientific knowledge. The experience of new sciences emergence, such as nanotechnology, molecular biology, medical physics, synergetics etc. demonstrates the difficulty of referring them to any single scientific sphere on the principle of their classical division. Secondly, on the basis of such interweaving, new spheres are born, such as gene engineering, nuclear power industry, artificial intelligence and so on, which are also communicatively binding not only different theoretical sciences but their applied embodiment and use in technical engineering. Applied knowledge has directly entered fundamental knowledge. All this could not but tell on the content of the “idea of a university”. It has let in itself pragmatics. The university has found itself in a situation when technical engineering designs on orders of industrial enterprises acquire dominant position at faculties that have traditionally been considered linked to fundamental research (Kryaklina, 2011).
Today, it is manifested in the fact that around the university that has been referred to as the classical university a multitude of universities of non-classical types have grown, like pedagogical (education), polytechnic, cooperative, new, private, humanitarian universities and so on. A non-classical character of the university’s life and its “idea” tells on the accretion of university and academic sciences, in the phenomenon of a technological transfer and in the emergence of cooperative unity of the university and industrial production. All this testifies to the changes that the contemporary “idea of a university” cannot but undergo nowadays.

3. Conclusion

Thus, the contemporary university is experiencing the times when the question about its future has no unambiguous answer. But it is clear that our time confronts us with new challenges, and the university meets them, first of all, by changes of its “idea”, which, while expressing its specific essence, has always reacted to its sociocultural environment. But the main question that demands not only further theoretical research but also practical conscious action consists in the following: what happens to the spiritual content and spiritual values of the classical “idea of a university”? Can the classical character of the university change? And if the classical nature of the “idea of a university” changes, does the university itself remain classical?

References