

# 1. Universities ‘inside’ the world: multiscale engagement levels

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Universities began their academic activity as elite institutions, building science and teaching that knowledge to a specific audience drawn from the higher social prestige classes: privileged institutions with privileged professional tasks and a privileged audience. More recently, most universities have moved in the direction of democratization, opening recruitment of teachers and researchers to those of diversified origins and directing their teaching toward a wider audience, heterogeneous in terms of gender, class, phenotype, culture and so on, thereby democratizing (at least partially<sup>1</sup>) access to knowledge produced in the academy. To this *low-intensity democratization* of universities is added the reflection of Bourdieu (1982), according to which the value of the diploma, outside of the school system, is associated with the value of its bearer in economic and social terms. This means that a diploma, achieved at the same university, corresponding to the same course, will have different values in the labor market due to the value of the bearer, which will differ according to the class of belonging, gender, phenotype and so on.

Undeniably the value of universities lies in the production of the ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2011) – that is, the knowledge that gives power and social prestige to their holders (knowledge as ‘property’<sup>2</sup>), democratizes access to scientific knowledge, and constructs reflexive societies (Beck, 1992) by encouraging the ability to think by oneself, thus building the foundation for a greater humanization of human beings and social life.

In discussing the role of universities within the communities to which they belong (but also for the wider society and the multiple societies that are part of universities through the plethora of students from different countries of the world), it is important to understand the meaning that they possess for the different surrounding social groups and vice versa.

Based on the reflection of the author as a researcher and university teacher over the past 22 years, this book chapter is presented as a humble theoretical contribution to thinking about the role of the university in its

relationship with the outside (be it at local, regional, national, European or world level), which begins to be part of it through the students who attend. The chapter discusses the social relevance of the university in the construction of fundamental knowledge, but also the knowledge that makes possible 'utopia as a place under construction' (Casa-Nova 2002), which means the production of a knowledge that enables the construction of possible and probable scenarios for humanity that enhances the building of societies that know how to direct their thinking towards its humanization.

## THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PAST AND PRESENT

Universities, founded in the Middle Ages, have played diverse roles over time. They have not controlled, since their founding, the monopoly of the production and dissemination of knowledge, given the existence of academies of science, which competed with universities in scientific knowledge production (Domingues 2013). The modern university was originated in the reorganization of the University of Berlin from what was designated as the Humboldtian model of university, advocated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, in particular in his text 'About internal and external organization of higher scientific institutions in Berlin' (1997).

The university reform proposed by Humboldt brought new light to the understanding of what should be the role of universities, defending the unity between research and teaching, where what is taught is the product of the research of who teaches, having as its end the human formation of the students. Research and students appear at the heart of the Humboldtian university and the teacher-researcher as a fundamental part in the process of transformation of knowledge into appropriate reflection by students, helping them in the appropriation of this knowledge and the development of critical and humanistic thought. The ultimate goal of this kind of university is the moral enrichment of the nation and the individual (thus the importance given by the author to the humanities and, in particular, philosophy). The principles of autonomy and freedom were inseparable parts of the Humboldtian university, being considered structural axes of university life, defending that education can never hamper the production of knowledge, and considering interdisciplinarity as a constitutive element of research practice and, therefore, of the relationship between researchers.

To the role of the university advocated by Humboldt, we would add the importance of democratizing access to knowledge through its dissemination by researchers, through university extension, acting as 'public

intellectuals': intellectuals committed to the construction of probable and possible futures in favor of a better world.

Along similar lines to Humboldt, Jaspers (1965) considers that the university has three major objectives, which for the author would be eternal: 1) because truth is only accessible to those who seek systematically, research is the main objective of the university; 2) because the scope of truth is greater than science, the university should be a center of culture available for the education of the human being as a whole; 3) because the truth is to be transmitted, the university teaches, and even the teaching of professional skills should be oriented to the integral formation.

This dual dimension of the university, producing a system of scientific knowledge and a center of culture, being nuclear to the Humboldtian university, is long forgotten, not only because of the functions that were recommended by the OECD in its 1987 report, but because of the constraints posed by the labor market, in a normative and functional perspective of the university rather than a critical and humanistic perspective. With the processes of globalization and, later, the economic and financial crisis – social transformation being inherent to both – the role of the university was gradually reconfigured, although with different nuances depending on governmental ideologies and consequent policies and the greater or lesser constraint on the part of the economic and financial market, in a globalized world, where each state is also constrained supranationally, to a mega scale.

The 1987 OECD report attributed to universities ten major functions that, when comparatively analyzed, reveal several internal contradictions, as we shall see later. These main functions consisted of: 1) a post-secondary education; 2) research; 3) a supply of skilled labor; 4) education and highly specialized training; 5) a strengthening of the competitiveness of the economy; 6) a selection mechanism for high-level jobs through credentials; 7) social mobility for the sons and daughters of disadvantaged social groups' families; 8) providing services to the region and the local community; 9) equal opportunities for women and racial minorities; and 10) preparation for the roles of social leadership. In this same report, the OECD stressed 'the enhanced importance of innovation and knowledge in modern societies and the economic importance of a skilled labor force' (1987: 98), highlighting these two functions.

The two most blatant contradictions of these functions assigned by the OECD to universities are, on the one hand, the functioning of universities as 'selection mechanisms' while advocating the 'social mobility' of the sons and daughters of disadvantaged social groups as well as equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities and, on the other, 'fundamental knowledge' production and 'functional knowledge' in the service of the economic and financial market.<sup>3</sup>

The contradictions inherent in the functions recommended by the OECD for the university lead Santos (1989: 14) to consider that these contradictions give rise to multiple tensions within universities, which represent the controlled reproduction of a given university crisis.

The first contradiction, between what the author calls 'exemplary knowledge' and 'functional knowledge', is seen to manifest itself as a *crisis of hegemony* of canonic knowledge. The university's inability to fully exercise the contradictory functions leads the social groups most affected by the functional deficit (or the state on their behalf) to seek alternative means to achieve their objectives. Consequently, this questions the exclusivity of the knowledge that the university produces.

The second contradiction is between 'hierarchy' and 'democratization', already alluded to, and it manifests itself as a *crisis of legitimacy*. According to Santos (1989: 15), 'there is a crisis of legitimacy whenever a given social condition is no longer commonly accepted.' The university undergoes a crisis of legitimacy to the extent that it becomes a visible social failure of collectively assumed targets.

The third contradiction, between 'institutional autonomy' and 'social productivity', manifests itself as an *institutional crisis*. The university suffers an institutional crisis when its organizational specificity is brought into question and when its efforts to impose organizational models prevalent in other institutions become seen as more efficient (e.g. the business model of success). That is, according to the requirements of a society functioning under a neoliberal system, universities become seen as companies with precarious contracts, looking for financing from millionaires, cost containment and demand for profit, depreciation of the social sciences and humanities because they are not profitable, instrumentalization of knowledge, and envisaging people as material resources at the service of a society of a deregulated market. These characteristics are currently visible in Portuguese universities,<sup>4</sup> and are consistent with the thinking of Castells, who speaks of the main functions that, in his view, universities currently play.

### **Castells and the Current Main Functions of the University**

In 2001, in a text titled 'Universities as dynamic systems of contradictory functions', Castells identifies as the four most important functions of universities (varying in degree taking into account the different societies to which they belong): a) a historical ideological apparatus, which expresses the ideological struggles present in all societies; b) producers' organizations of mechanisms of selection, socialization and reproduction of elites; c) the creation of knowledge, although with a minor role at present, given the

existence of specialized national institutes in research; and d) the most traditional and currently more emphasized function, related to the 'training' of a skilled labor force, which Castells calls the 'professional university'.

Interestingly, in this typology, the human formation of students as citizens, is not given relevance, further emphasizing the instrumental role of universities in the service of economic and financial markets. What is central is the individual as an element of human capital, a material resource which should be fully made profitable according to the requirements of those markets. What matters is 'investing in training through courses academically valid and immediately relevant to the labor market' (Estêvão 2014: 117).

### **The University and Government Agendas**

The evidence seems clear that universities at present are at the heart of government agendas that enhance the production of new knowledge and innovative thinking, in regard to the supply both of human resources that are highly specialized (hard skills) and of those that are highly flexible, adaptable and sensitive (soft skills). Such skills ensure the requirements that I have identified as 'capitalism mining' (Casa-Nova 2013), seeking constantly new products and higher profit margins, reducing wages and making work highly precarious. The important thing is to seek to maintain economic competitiveness, through unceasingly innovative and simultaneously disposable research and students able to serve the greed and market interests.

In Portugal, 'it is assumed as a political priority that useful and economically relevant knowledge (which meets strict standards and is clearly defined) forms typical global chains within scientific and technological production' (Lima 2015: 13). Still according to the author

the principle of utility, in those precise terms, cannot fail to exclude or marginalize broad fields and knowledge of the humanities and social sciences. It adds up what could be called the principle of individualization and maximization in the context of human capital and technical-instrumental rationality. (Lima 2015: 13)

As a result of international and national constraints and pressures to achieve a certain 'abnormal normativity', the transformation of universities turns towards the appreciation of their instrumental and mercantile dimensions, losing much of their sense of academic community and democratic collegiality. What triumphs in this process is individualism and a hyper-bureaucratized 'intellectual working class' all locked in a daily struggle for survival. Veiga et al. (2014: 13–14) note that 'collegiality

as a reflex of distinctive academic capital and its networks decreases in favor of setting priorities and developing mechanisms for control by institutional directors.’ These directors often come from the business world, professional managers concerned only with profit; they turn universities into companies and remove management and direction from the hands of university professors previously identified as those who best know the functioning and needs of universities. These professional managers value what Lima ironically identifies as ‘The best science: the academic entrepreneur and economically relevant knowledge production’ (Lima 2015: 14).

## THE FUTURE OF UNIVERSITIES: TOWARDS THEIR RE-RECONFIGURATION?

In view of the situation described above, a set of questions arises:

1. How can we articulate the autonomy of the university with the economic importance of knowledge?
2. How can we articulate freedom to investigate with the interests of the funding agencies?
3. How can we build a ‘full university’, a university where all the sciences are of equal value?
4. How can we articulate the democratization of access to higher education with the formation of elites?
5. How can we articulate the ‘professional university’ with human development and the construction of a civic university, attentive to the democratization process, the non-alienation of labor, and the human rights of all who are part of the university?
6. How can we articulate the necessary independence of the university from the production of knowledge disconnected from needs and demands of global, national, regional and local interests and organizations without spoiling its foundational role, as advocated by and since the Humboldtian university?

In a brief response to each of these questions I would say:

1. *Bringing autonomy back in.*<sup>5</sup> The autonomy of universities plays a basic role in: the production of fundamental knowledge (the kind of knowledge that has allowed the discovery of the technology of laser rays, which at the time had no social or market utility but later proved to be essential, namely with regard to medical treatment); ‘finding by

finding', not in terms of immediate social or market utility; and the fruition of divergent thinking and the maturation time of this kind of thinking. The construction of this kind of knowledge is compatible with the construction of economically important knowledge, provided that the latter does not overlap the first. This means no hierarchy within the kind of knowledge that is produced, creating equal space for both within universities. The role of universities includes influencing the course of societies, transforming them to become more human. And, for that, their role should be active, critical and humanistic.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the conception I have of social change is one that allows the construction of middle-class societies where the human being is the center of all.

2. *Rescuing the freedom to investigate.* The second issue is linked to the first: the freedom to investigate cannot be imprisoned by the interests of funding agencies, because this means not only the loss of autonomy, but also the loss of research not considered mainstream by companies and other funding agencies.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, we can ask to what extent the interests of large companies, financial industries and market regulators control the development of technologies that might improve the quality of life of people with disabilities (blindness, deafness, deaf-blindness, motor disability, etc.). With the potential market of customers comparatively low, investment in production of these technologies would not be sufficiently profitable, but would construct more humane societies.
3. *Defending equality of research objects and sciences.* The loss of objects of research as a result of the 'amputation' of a significant part of university-based knowledge development in the field of social sciences and humanities means that the 'full university' has been lost to the crisis of our times. Within the contemporary university, the importance given by administrators to sciences that can bring major funds to the universities is clearly visible. Certain kinds of courses are closed because they are seen as not productive, based on the number of students who choose those courses, and from the point of view of the scientific validity that is given to them by the universities. They are called 'minor science', which, from the point of view of the administrators, only serves to increase the costs of the university. What is thereby lost in these biased decisions and policies is the sense of a 'full university', the university of utopian ideas.
4. *Transforming low-intensity democratization to high-intensity democratization.* The democratization of universities – their opening to a non-traditional audience – sprang from the disadvantaged social groups, and forced the universities, with different gradations and

safeguarding the education level differences, to deal with the same problems that arose from the opening of secondary education to the same segment of the population. With the appearance of the 'mass university', the traditional university was not able to build a new role suitable to the new reality. Instead of quality of knowledge and education for all, most of these enlarged universities moved to provide knowledge and quality education for some, and weaker forms of knowledge by means of peripheral teaching to others, thereby lowering the level of academic requirement to achieve success at the levels required by administrators and governments. This is part of what I call the *low-intensity democratization* of universities, with students from disadvantaged social groups attending in large part the lower social prestige courses, while the most prestigious courses remain for privileged participants drawn from the higher social classes. In this regard, Bourdieu and Champagne (1999: 485) report that 'the higher educational institutions and especially those that lead to positions of economic and political power remain exclusive as ever.' In this sense, 'the open education system at all, and at the same time, strictly reserved for the few, manages the feat of bringing together the appearances of democracy and the reality of reproduction, which takes place on a higher degree of dissimulation and therefore, with a greater effect of social legitimacy.'<sup>8</sup>

In line with what I mentioned in point 1), in this case the 'utopia, as a place under construction' (Casa-Nova 2002), involves the re-configuration of the university in order to look at each student, regardless of the student's class of origin, as the center of the teaching-learning process and the production of new knowledge, enhancing comprehensive education, with the development of critical thinking and cultural fulfillment.<sup>9</sup> These are the bases for the construction of middle-class societies where everyone has the possibility of being central, highly educated, and possessed of access to cultural fulfillment and an acceptable quality of life regardless of their situation in the labor market. In this regard, Esping-Andersen (1990) reflects on the decommodification index of societies and its importance for the construction of the well-being democratic state. For this, it is also necessary gradually to make access to universities free rather than gradually make it more expensive, where many students, before they enter the labor market, are already financially heavily indebted.

5. *Ennobling the teacher-researcher role.* And now we come to university professors, whose everyday professional life, as knowledge producers and builders of knowledge with their students, is sometimes



envisioned to be central to the educational process. However, their working conditions in the university, a hyper-bureaucratized and hyper-centralized organization, often manifest, according to Trow, 'the loss of academic community authority and the increasing power of directors, with the subsequent university decline as a community marked by weakening of scientists' identification with their institutions' (2000: 2). Thus we are a far cry from the teacher-researcher profile of the Humboldtian university, where the person who teaches also researches. Now the teacher teaches according to the needs of the market, often building a teacher profile identical to that of the secondary school teacher. The teacher–student relationship is not one that produces science, but rather seeks to advance its organizational consequences. With heavy teaching loads and a variety of disciplines to teach every semester, faculty teachers become *alienated workers*; they do not investigate what they teach; they have little time to properly prepare lessons or build critical thinking with students. Teachers become minor researchers on precarious contracts, receiving only a 'hand labor' wage. Deprived of scientific autonomy, curricular and pedagogical, they prepare students for the labor market, teaching what others have investigated and researched. For this reason, in countries like the United States or the United Kingdom, many of the most prestigious universities are those that are primarily dedicated to research. The latter are not 'professional universities'. But they have also long forgotten the ideal of the Humboldtian university. The development of academic criticism and humanistic citizenship, ensuring that the different actors join in the construction of the future of the academy in its different dimensions (university management, knowledge, education, the integral formation of students, cultural development and extension), is what builds a strong community that defends the public interest in an uncompromising fashion. Such is also the way to transform the university into the *agora* (Estêvão, 2014) of truly higher education.

6. *Bringing the 'sense of university' back in.* Without forgetting the societies to which they belong, mainly because they are inhabited by them in every way (the university institution is built according to the current values in each society in a given social and historical time), universities are dialectical institutions. That is, they require time to rethink themselves, fulfilling their noble role of society's 'motor'. Constructed properly, they produce innovative fundamental knowledge, understandings independent of the policies of governments, international agendas, and regional and local interests.

This is the *first step to bringing the 'sense of university' back in.*

The *second step* concerns the production of knowledge that, based on the knowledge of the past and present, allows the construction of probable and possible futures: a prospective analysis of the social as a whole.

The *third step* relates to the production of knowledge for the welfare of humanity, functional knowledge that leads to a particular social transformation.

The *fourth step* concerns the integral formation of students, contributing to the significant appropriation of knowledge, the production of critical and humanistic thought and the construction of a cultural human being who can help transform societies and the world towards its humanization.

These are the four main meanings of the university, thus intervening at a regional, national and world level, helping to transform societies so that meaning is found by building more humane human beings and more democratic, just and egalitarian societies.

Taking into account the overall reflections presented here, we could translate these reflections into two types of university. The currently more common kind we call *the fragmented, business-driven, individualistic university* (Figure 1.1). The other kind, which it is desirable should be built so that a better future is possible, we call *the total university of collegiality and integral formation* (Figure 1.2).

The two types of university are ideal-types in the Weberian sense. The exterior circles surrounding Figures 1.1 and 1.2 are transverse to the entire university, and their content is different depending on the type of university. On the other hand, while in Figure 1.1 the triangular sections of the circle do not have the same dimensions with respect to fundamental knowledge and functional knowledge to the market, showing the hierarchy existing between the two types of knowledge, in Figure 1.2 all the triangular sections are of the same size, indicating the existing equality between them.

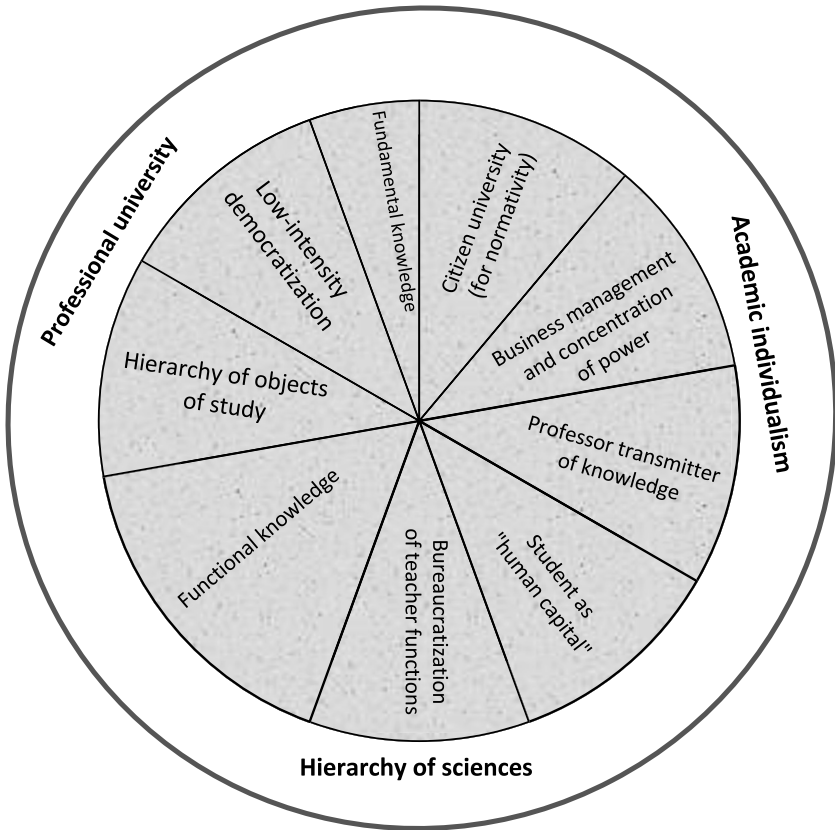


Figure 1.1 The fragmented, business-driven, individualistic university

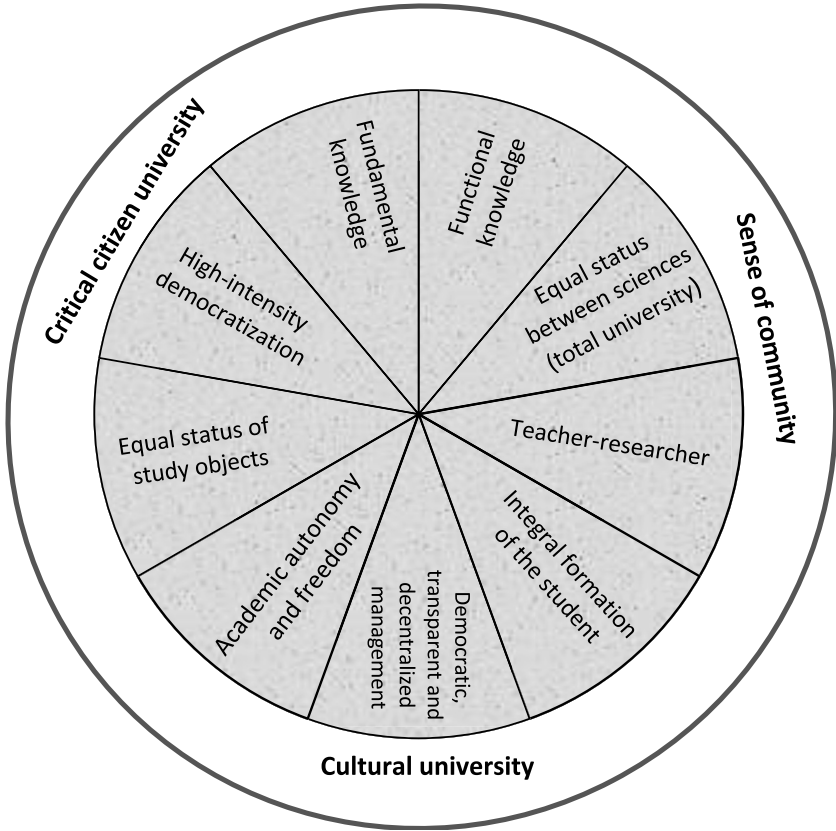


Figure 1.2 The total university of collegiality and integral formation

## NOTES

1. To those who manage to “place” it (although also in a hierarchical way, given the various university courses do not have the same social value).
2. Knowledge as a property such as a land, a house or a car, with the exception of being the only internal property to the individual and that this can carry with them anywhere in the world and that can be multiplied by divergent thinking, producing new knowledge.
3. Knowledge can also be functional to society (and it is important to be), but in the sense of its importance to the positive transformation of the quality of life of all human beings, which is not defended by the economic and financial market.
4. For a diachronic analysis of the Portuguese University, see Lima (1996), where the author constructs a typology of three university models to characterize different periods of the history of Portuguese University.
5. This title is inspired by Michael Young's book title: *Bringing knowledge back in* (2007) where the author defends the need, in schools, young people have access to the knowledge disconnected of the context (abstract knowledge) as a means of access to the knowledge produced by the various sciences that gives power and social prestige to their holders.
6. Being aware of the impossibility of being completely neutral on the ideas that are expressed in any scientific text and hence the impossibility not to be normative (the very term “non-normative” is, in itself, normative), the aim is the replacement of a particular standard by another towards emancipation (because the regulation - mainly legal regulation-may also be towards the emancipation).
7. This subject is addressed in a very interesting way by Feagin (2001) and Feagin *et al* (2009) on the subject of “Public Sociology” advocated by Burawoy (2005; 2009).
8. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the transmission of cultural capital is a very important empirical contribution (Bourdieu & Passeron, s/d; Bourdieu, 1988; 1996) to look at the universities as reproduction systems of social inequalities. On the same line, we may see that universities such as Stanford, Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge are still elite universities, keeping deliberately one comparatively low number of students not to turn into mass universities, playing a conservative role in societies.
9. For a different perspective to look at the mass higher education, see Trow (1974) where the author does a distinction between elite and mass higher education, considering different types of universities playing different roles in society.

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