

## Centre and Periphery in a Global University System

I

From its beginnings in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the European university was a global and a universalistic organization. It was universalistic in its knowledge claims as the knowledge it produced and processed was supposed to be temporally invariable (but this temporal stability was something one had to work for against the probability of decay<sup>1</sup>). The knowledge of the university was secondly characterized by social universality as it was expected to be true and therefore binding for everybody in the world who had any interest in knowledge at all. And, thirdly, knowledge had a material or thematic universality in not being restricted to limited domains or fields in the world but instead being able to claim a universal relevance for any domain of human living.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore the late medieval European university can be described as a global institution if one looks at its spatial reach. The university system was based on more or less Pan-European migration patterns (of scholars and students) and on a European relevance and validity of the degrees universities conferred on their successful students. This spatial globality of the university was well illustrated by the social structure of the four “nations” from which many universities consisted. These were not “nations” in a modern understanding of this term which would be based on political membership and ascribed ethnicity. The medieval “nation” was a much more formalistic structure, simply meaning the four spatial directions from which the university recruited its members.

In a third respect the late medieval university can be understood as a socially inclusive institution. It was never reserved and specially designated for one stratum in the stratified society of estates. It never was an institution of the nobility what can easily be seen in the broad early modern movement of establishing “colleges for the nobles” which was directed against the universities but was in the end unsuccessful and disappeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of looking towards the nobility the university was closely linked to the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stichweh 1991, VII, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stichweh 2003 on the interrelation of universality, globality and inclusion.

“Paupertas” and to the still universal church as one institutional embodiment of this concept of paupertas.

The main centre/periphery structure built into this early European situation was the factual difference between European regions in which academic learning was prominent and represented by significant institutions and other European regions in which no universities existed. These latter regions had to send all their intellectually able young men to the regions endowed with universities.

## II

In the early modern situation after 1500 a new structure arose from this starting constellation of the European university system. We observe the colonial expansion of the major European powers and in its wake the transfer of the university as an educational institution to North America, Asia, Latin America, and much later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Australia and Africa. But much more important for our argument are the territorial consolidation of the colonial and other European powers and the processes of state-formation related to it. The university became an institution of the territorial state and in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it became an institution of the national state and each individual university was going to become part of a national university system. Of course, the migration between territories and between states never disappeared. There always were some institutions of European visibility and attractiveness which motivated migrations from other territorial states. As the early modern university culture was in many respects a culture dominated by legal studies most of these points of European attractiveness were universities with very strong law faculties – such as Padova, Leiden, Orléans, Göttingen and Edinburgh.

But the dominant facet of the early modern university system and still of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century situation was the national university system. The rise and fall of universities became the rise and fall of national university systems – and these are the dynamics and conjunctures pictured in Joseph Ben-David’s influential “The Scientist’s Role in Society” from 1971 and in others of his writings.<sup>3</sup> National university systems functioned as models for university reforms and university foundations in other countries and national university systems were the destination of significant international migration movements such as the American migrations to Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course there were centers and peripheries in national university systems but even these centers were primarily perceived as being the epitome and apex of *their* national university system.

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<sup>3</sup> Ben-David 1971; Ben-David 1977

### III

One could give good reasons to start the history of universities only in 1900. Around 1900 there are 500.000 students in the world which amounts to ca. 1% of the world population in the relevant age group. A hundred years later there are 100 million students which means a growth of the university by a factor of 200 in only a hundred years. In most OECD-countries between 30 and 80% of the male and female population now become university students for some years in their life.<sup>4</sup> And these 100 million students are educated in 20.000 universities which well documents the worldwide presence of the university as an institution. Talcott Parsons had still based his argument for the societal centrality of the university on the thesis that the university is “the most important structural component of modern societies that had no direct counterpart earlier types of society”.<sup>5</sup> This is today affirmed and extended by the university really becoming a big societal institution and its becoming in terms of the production of technology and the production of human capital the main circumstance on which economic development and economic growth depends.<sup>6</sup> Higher education is no longer an organization concentrated on the education of only the leadership of a country as it was in China and in premodern Europe. It is beginning to realize its universalist claims already formulated around 1200 and participation at higher education tends to become a near universal precondition for the integration of persons into numerous functional domains of modern life.

### IV

How is this world system of 20.000 universities organized in terms of the formation of centres and peripheries? I have to concentrate on very few points, and I have to say that my remarks are very preliminary and this does not only result from the state of my own work. It does result, too, from a lack of published research on the world system of universities.

First of all there are still national systems of higher education as a dominant reality. I take the case of Switzerland as I now know it somehow after staying here for five years and as many of you are not from Switzerland. It is a system with 200.000 students, i.e. 0.2 % of the world population, and with 20 universities, 12 research universities and 8 universities of applied sciences. It is remarkable that there are no private universities although there is probably more private wealth in Switzerland than anywhere else in the world. It is a strictly binary system with tightly fixed institutional and financial barriers between the two sectors which engenders a lot of conflict and bad feeling between the two sectors. The twelve

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Schofer and Meyer 2005; Goldin and Katz 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Parsons 1961, p. 261.

<sup>6</sup> See very interesting for the US in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Goldin and Katz 2008.

research universities try to establish themselves on the same level of academic practice. That is only approximate, of course. There are some peripheral institutions which are perhaps endangered – in my view Neuchâtel, having too many subjects for too few students, and Lucerne, which does not get the political and financial support a state university needs for its survival. But they may survive just because they are so peripheral. Then there are universities who try to be actors on the world stage and who dissolve some links to the Swiss system in ever more looking for worldwide comparisons. And there is the interesting case of the *EPFL*. The president of the EPFL is often absent from the otherwise closely knit club of the Swiss Rectors Conference in which you are not allowed to send a substitute. Possibly, this university president has more important world business to do. And in place of a more extensive argument I cite the most recent class of doctoral students who were accepted as members of the graduate schools of the EPFL in autumn 2008. There were around 600 new doctoral students in a university of 7.000 students. Nearly 40% came from a great number of countries all of which sent only few students. Another 40% came from some bigger players such as the US, Germany, France, Italy each of which sent around 4 to 6 %. And then there are two significant contributors: It is Switzerland itself which still sends 10% doctoral students to one of its best universities and it is Iran wherefrom came 22% of the applicants and 11% of the students accepted.

What one can derive from such a description is that a new type of university is emerging of which the EPFL may be one example which is clearly of and in Lausanne but not in the same way of and in Switzerland. It is obviously a world university (but one might add that from the cognitive tradition of the university there are only world universities), and it tries to be with a term which only arose in the last few years a world-class university.

V

What is behind these developments? There seems to arise something new in the present-day situation. We no longer have to do with a reality dominated by national university systems which sometimes learn from other national university systems and try to imitate some of their inventions but which most of the time follow the evolutionary trajectory of the individual national university system which in some respects is isolated from its neighbors. Instead we observe the construction of a world system of universities which is based on three mechanisms playing similar roles in other function systems of modern society: Global comparisons, global interrelationships or networks, global exchange.

Global comparisons are to be seen in the numerous rankings of universities or subunits of universities arising since the 1980s. As rankings and league tables did in the function system of sports since 1880 their effect nearly always is the unification and globalization of a

cognitive space.<sup>7</sup> The influential rankings published by the weekly newspaper “U.S. News & World Report” since 1983 contributed to the consolidation of a national university system in the United States. You can no longer restrict comparisons to a regional space of neighbors (say sociology in Mid-Atlantic states). You have to accept instead that year after year sociology in Columbia will be compared to Berkeley and even if you do not believe in the results – and as a sociologist know the numerous methodological errors built into the rankings - you will perhaps do something you never would have done without these rankings.

The same results probably will come about via the global university rankings only existing since 2003 (Shanghai Ranking 2003; THES 2004). After only a few years the effects are significant. Perhaps the most important effect is that universities somehow loosen the links to national university systems and prefer the link and the comparison to competitors in often far distant countries. And one of the most remarkable developments is that they are often supported in doing this by *their* national governments who themselves adopt the language of international comparison and steer their universities into international competition. Organizations arise consisting of universities who claim for historical or contemporary reasons a privileged place in the space of global research universities. A good example is the league of European research universities (LERU) which started in 2002 with 12 members and since 2006 has 20 members from 9 countries. On its website it places a statement being somehow critical of unidimensional rankings but of course it bases its membership on quantitative and qualitative measurement.

The space of organizations aspiring for a high rank in one of the university rankings will probably become a very crowded space. It is a characteristic feature of university strategies in the last few years that universities identify the position they aspire for in relevant rankings. Warwick University publishes on its website a strategy which aims to place it among the 50 best universities in the world at its 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee in 2015. The University of Minnesota advertises a strategy process which proclaims that it intends to be one of the three leading public universities in the world. You find plans of this type in Korea, Japan, Austria, Australia and in many other countries and in many different versions. Sometimes time horizons are realistically long. For example, the “Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile” intends to be a world-class institution when it becomes 150 years in 2038.

There arise new semantics in this situation of global comparisons becoming ever more prominent. There is the term “research university” which is traditional but on which much emphasis is laid in our days. There is the language of “elite” and in recent years “excellence” both of which provoke the question how big or how small an elite or an excellence class is supposed to be. I remember a remark by Joseph Ben-David who said that Europeans always suppose that an elite is a very small group whereas in the United States you are able to perceive an elite as a population of some quantitative extent. And, finally, and perhaps most

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<sup>7</sup> See the fascinating study on the genesis of modern sport via observers Werron 2009.

prominent in the last few years there arose the term “world-class university” which may be the most precise as it identifies the social system – the world as a society or as a social system – which function as the reference context of the respective claims.

VI

Besides global comparisons there are two other mechanisms which are driving forces in the processes of the construction of a world system of universities. Global interrelationships and global exchange. I already pointed to an interesting case of interrelatedness as a practice of the reciprocal affirmation of status. The “League of European Research Universities” is not only an exclusive club of the universities who consider themselves to be the best in Europe. It is also a kind of protective system which tries to shield its members against potential levelling effects of rankings. In rankings you can lose or win a number of places from one year to the next (and there already have been cases – for example in Malaysia - of vice-chancellors of universities who had to abdicate after such a slide in university rankings). The reciprocal affirmation of belonging to the very best and doing this over a longer time span somehow buffers you against these surprises.

Anyway, interrelatedness means that it does not suffice if you incessantly compare yourself to other relevant entities in the space you inhabit. In a second respect you have to build relationships towards them. And this obviously is a dimension and a mechanism of its own. You are not significant by outperforming many others in global comparisons, but you are significant by building up a complex set of interrelationships towards many other organizations and by getting a favorable network position by doing this. Being in the center or being at the periphery in this respect depends on interrelationships and network positions gained via them.

And then comes the third mechanism which identifies again a dimension of its own. It is again not sufficient if you only are interrelated with many others and do extensive cooperations on the basis of these interrelations. In the world system of universities arising in our days you have to participate in significant processes of exchange. That means you have to exchange students and you have to exchange academic personnel and only this ensures that you belong to the system which can confer on you world-class status. In this situation it can be a serious critique if it can be said for example that Korean universities do not succeed to recruit foreign personnel and do not succeed to win a significant number of foreign students. This participation in processes of exchange becomes a value which is somehow self-explaining and irrefutable and you need not prove that something useful arises for you and your foreign recruitments from these processes of exchange. I do not doubt that a strong argument can be made for the cognitive enrichment derived from these exchange processes. But the rhetorical effectiveness of the semantics of global exchange

among universities does not depend on this proof of cognitive enrichment really being made in convincing terms. Global exchange is a self-validating value relevance as it is the case with global interrelatedness and global comparisons, too.

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