

Between the Regional and the Universal: The University in Our Time

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The era in which we are living is Janus faced. One of its faces is turned towards the phenomenon of globalization, creating a homogenous civilization, and even culture, across national and continental boundaries; the other, towards the phenomenon of regional, ethnic, cultural and generic fragmentation of nations and societies the world over. Between these two powerful phenomena stands today the institution of the university, stressed and strained by the opposing pulls of contrary forces. From the liberal-humanist concept of the university, presented by Cardinal Newman¹ to the present-day perception of the institution embodied in the new nomenclature "multiversity," we have come a long way in changing the role and function the university is to perform in relation to the interests of the society in which it is situated and in relation to the cause of universal knowledge it has to advance. Although the changes that have come about are several and severe, I shall try to examine the more important ones.

Economic Globalization and Ethnic Assertion

It was Marshall McLuhan,² a Canadian scholar, who used the term "global village" in the nineteen sixties, by which he meant the world ushered in by the electronic media revolution. From then on the use of the term global has spread so much that today few issues, concerning health or education, resource or population, energy or environment get discussed without growing into global dimensions. However, what has come to occupy prominence in the march towards globalization is the force of economic liberalization, permitting free play of capital across national and regional boundaries, ethnic and cultural

communities, creating thereby a superhighway to an economicotechnological civilization.

The high velocity of globalization, in accordance with the third law of motion, has, however, invited an equally powerful reaction, call it counter-revolution, of ethnic and cultural fragmentation of the "global village" or society. As democracy has spread among the nations of Asia and Africa, which until World War II were European colonies, an unprecedented upsurge of the assertion of ethnic and cultural identities has been perceived. As a result, the present-day world has become, more than ever before, a battle ground of very different systems of philosophy, religion and culture, which, if anything, is strengthening the categories of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' at a global level. As the International Association of Universities' Policy Outline and Strategic Development Plan 1995-2000 states:

There is a marked contrast between the world of finance, economy and technology, which is increasingly integrated, and political societies that live alongside of one another rather than together in the cultural and social 'milieu,' which is rich in its particularities but above all concerned at defending and promoting these particularities as such by denying the right of others to exist as by their subjugation.³

Universities caught in conflict

It is between these two conflicting and contradictory movements of our time that the universities have to forge their functions and redefine their roles. While they are required, on the one hand, to open up for an international exposure in order to remain competitive in the various disciplines of study and research, they are expected to remain, on the other, embedded in the local culture and society of their placement. These contrary claims open up two very different possibilities for the future of our universities. On the one hand, they can become instruments for the internationalization of knowledge and knowhow, operating as channels of interaction between cultures, leading to cooperation in both social and political domains; on the other, they can also become instruments of regional and parochial interests, promoting the process of cultural withdrawal, the rejection of the "other," nourishing narrow nationalism and cultural intolerance. Both these possibilities lie dormant in the situation in which our universities find themselves today. This crossroad situation has placed them under tremendous pressure, making unprecedented demands.

As a result, during the last quarter of the century, the role and function of the university have undergone a drastic change.

From Wisdom & Universal values to Skills & Fragmenting Specialization

For over four hundred years after the European Renaissance, the university was understood to be what Cardinal Newman pithily described it as:

A place where an assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers...He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and shades, apprehends them. Hence it is that his education is called 'liberal'. A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, meditation, and wisdom.⁴

As against this liberal-humanist function of the university designed to promote the pursuit of knowledge and disinterested thinking, we have today what has come to be called, because of its increased functions, multiversity. The present-day university was described by Professor Federico Mayor, the Director-General of UNESCO, in 1991:

A university is for the training, at a high level, of citizens capable of acting efficiently and effectively in their various functions and activities, including the most diverse, up-to-date, and specialized; for the life-long and intensive education of all citizens who so wish; for the updating of knowledge; for preparing teacher trainers; for identifying and addressing great national issues; for contributing to the analysis and solution of the major problems affecting and concerning the whole planet; for cooperating with industry and the service sectors in the progress of the nation; for forging attitudes of understanding and tolerance; for providing governments with the scientifically reliable information required for decision making on such important areas as the environment, in the context of the progressive 'scientification' of political decision-making.⁵

Comparing the two concepts of the university we may note how the pursuit of pure knowledge has been replaced by training in various

skills; the gathering of general ideas by the search for special knowledge; and the cultivation of disinterestedness by the promotion of national or political interest. Besides, the added task of continuing education, updating and refreshing knowledge and skill, making education a service to industry and administration, has burdened the university with a number of utilitarian functions it had not been concerned with before. The most noticeable change in this complex process of transformation from an institution of pure learning, or philosophic knowledge, to a service-station for imparting useful information and training, can be grasped from the alteration in the source of its driving power. Earlier, the university was driven from within and was a self-directed institution, which would determine of its own the goals and purposes to be pursued in the realm of knowledge. Today, the university is driven from without by market forces or ruling powers; its goals and purposes are decided either by the corporate sector or the state apparatus. Realizing the significance of higher education in the economic, industrial, and military development of a nation-state, the corporate industry, as well as the state government has developed vested interest in the management of the university. And since the cost of advanced scientific and technological education has grown beyond the resources of the university, it has out of compulsion accepted subjugation to the governing forces of the globalized world.

Specialism is another by-product of the unprecedented advancement of knowledge in our time. The original disciplines of knowledge have split into innumerable specializations, each further branching off into more refined areas growing in the direction of the useful. We no longer have in the universities scholars engaged in the cultivation of their minds, acquiring general knowledge, relating their special knowledge to the general, and developing a moral sense on issues concerning the general question of 'how to live'; instead, we have specialists, separated in their respective cells of study, investigating narrow areas of specialization, hardly concerned with or even aware of, what goes on in the world of political and social tensions, ethnic and cultural conflicts, regional and global issues.

Related to the phenomenon of specialism is the logical separation of the disciplines, inimical to the liberal idea of an interaction among different disciplines creating a climate conducive to the common pursuit of learning shaping scholars into educated and imaginative minds, who would provide leadership in different walks of life and

act as examples of civil and moral conduct responsible for the sustenance and advancement of civilization towards its ultimate goal of creating a free, classless, and just society. Instead, we have departments of information and skill for different trades and professions, like assembly lines in industry, each responsible for its own special job, and collaborating without interaction in collecting the different special jobs into a larger mechanism for providing useful service to the state, corporate sector, or both.

Humanities devalued and Regionalized

In this overriding concern with practical and useful knowledge and information, rather than pure and philosophic learning, the humanities, which earlier constituted the soul of the university organism, have suffered the most. They have not only been pushed to the rear, but been compelled to become, like the disciplines of technology and management, directly useful for society—if not for the global civilization of the super highway, at least for the local and regional communities and societies in which the university stands grounded. As Guy Neave has rightly said:

Since the human condition has given way to production and exchange as what regulates the life and happiness of consumers, the Humanities themselves no longer represent universalism. Rather, they have been relocated as local accounts of national or regional exceptionalism, couched in forms of literature, social behaviour and past achievement of a particular territory. As a species of embedded knowledge, the skills they generate are held not to be immediately operational or, for that matter, applicable without further specific training. And, furthermore, those holding them are largely confined to national labour market. In short, technique is universal. Values are local.⁶

Thus, the postmodernist concern of the Humanities with regional histories and cultural studies has to be viewed in this context of the phenomenon of globalization.

Simultaneously, we find that the university today has shifted from a general-education concern to a specialized knowledge focus, so much so that we have in our time, not composite universities aiming at achieving a unified sensibility and education of the mind, but “service stations” targetting specialized knowledge and particular training in various skills and professions. No wonder then that we have all kinds of institutions getting to be called universities—technical university,

medical university, agriculture university, Ayurveda University, Homeopathy University, Sanskrit University, Punjabi University, Islamic Studies University, Sikh Studies University, Women Studies University, Rural University, and what have you. The fragmentization of knowledge into specialities runs parallel to the restructuring of industry and business into specialized productions and sales. It also runs parallel to the phenomenon of fragmentization in the social sector where ethnic and linguistic communities, cultural and tribal groups, constitute nationalities and sub-nationalities. All these phenomena are simultaneous because all are being driven by the common market forces sweeping the globe today.

Market forces take over

While the phenomenon of globalization has been responsible for the introduction of business norms in the universities, treating institutions of higher education as human industry to be accountable for investments made for its sustenance, and to be responsible for the quality of its produce expected to be competitive in the international market, the phenomenon of fragmentization has been responsible for the introduction of political demands, treating universities as national or regional service-station for the welfare of local people. The end result of both these phenomena has been an unprecedented interference by outside authorities in the governance of universities. While making recommendations for the future of universities in Canada, Alfonso Borrero Cabel has pertinently commented on the universities of the West:

The problem is that various governments, particularly in England, Australia and some U.S. States, have seen it fit to impose rigid requirements and budgetary formulas in the name of accountability. The Commission believes that Canada would be ill-served by adopting a heavy-handed bureaucratic approach to this matter. For example, Canada should avoid the elaborate, bureaucratic and time-consuming questionnaires and site visits which the British universities have adopted as way of heading off even more draconian measures by the government itself. Apart from normal financial auditing, what Canadian universities need to demonstrate is that they are genuinely accessible to those with the appropriate abilities, are equitable in their admission practices, and are producing an appropriate number of graduates who are satisfied with the education they have received and whose work is satisfactory to their employees. That is what people expect and that can be

measured.⁷

This much for universities in Canada and the West. As for the Indian universities, the bureaucratic stranglehold and political interference are much worse. Thus, the recent concept of accountability has compelled universities to submit their financial, administrative, and even academic accounts to the master authorities and agencies created for the purpose by the powers that be. Obviously, this has led to an elaborate book-keeping system in the universities, increasing their financial burden of unacademic activities, shifting focus from the common pursuit of learning to the various targets of practical goals measurable in hard cash terms as achievement and failure.

In ideological terms, the confrontation between economic globalization and cultural fragmentation is actually a combat between the New Right, aggressively promoting utilitarianism, and the New Left, energetically defending those marginalised and repressed by the 'other'. It may be temporary, but for the time being economic liberalism has come to dominate the global scene, defeating its immediate predecessor, the socialist welfarism. In our time, the market-forces have assumed the status of the Greek gods, operating as anonymously and arbitrarily. While the universities have been made scrutinizable, the market-forces remain beyond human reach. Even when disasters take place in universities or in nations, we have only to wait for the market-forces to react. Just as the Phobians do in *Oedipus Rex*, we can only look up to the gods to remove the plague. As Ruth Jonathan has summed-up:

It is neither possible nor necessary to rehearse here the recent advance across much of the developed world of a strange hybrid of the exhumed social beliefs of nineteenth-century liberalism and the procedural principles of modern liberal thought. This hybrid...given political opportunity by the world-wide recession of the mid-1970's (which came just when welfarism was starting to groan under the weight of rising expectations and demographic change), has spread like a mutant virus and is now variously regarded as neoliberalism, libertarianism, or the New Right. Its hallmarks have been a declared intention 'to roll back the state, to empower the individual, and to bring the discipline of the market into the distribution not only of private goods but of social goods such as health and even positioned goods such as education, so that talent and effort should be rewarded and recklessness and dependency carry their own penalties.'⁸

After welfarism was defeated in the late 70's the New Left pro-

moted the bandwagon of postmodernism and postcolonialism to fight the monster of blind materialism, challenging concealed imperialism, encouraging the threatened minorities for an all-out assertion of their democratic right to retain their own identities. Between these two warring forces, fiercely engaged in a decisive battle, the university in our time stands rather confused. Having lost its earlier autonomous status and self-direction, the university today only carries whatever function is assigned or offered to it in the form of the new and the latest demands of the age. In short, the university today is not to provide leadership in different walks of life, it is only to act as an agency for producing skills and practices demanded by local and international markets.

Universities abjectly reflect spiritual confusion

For the moment abstaining from a more detailed analysis of the drastic changes that have come about in the function of universities, it could be said in conclusion that the most vital change has been in the way 'study' is viewed today. We no longer study ideas in the universities, although our research degree continues to be called Doctorate in Philosophy. What we study today are principles and processes, systems and structures, of natural or material objects or phenomena. In this scientification of our research and learning, the question of morality and the relevance of value have been reduced to redundancy. The only morality and the only value is utility and marketability of whatever you discover or invent in the name of study and research. One could agree with A.H. Hasley:

Beneath the facade of development and hopefulness of today, universities all over the world hide a peculiar malaise of impotence. They have little inner self-confidence because they lack any clear, agreed sense of direction or purpose. . . . They share rather than transcend the spiritual confusion of the age.⁹

As for Indian universities, they continue to copy abjectly whatever becomes current in the universities of Great Britain, our earlier masters. Our voluminous Reports submitted by various Commissions and Committees bear it out that we continue to follow our masters more faithfully after they quit the sub-continent. Our abject reliance on the West has been responsible for an astounding absence of initiative and invention in our universities. Under the pressure of expanding

population and mounting regionalism, we have only multiplied our universities from 26 in 1947 to 236 today, ensuring not only academic mediocrity but also cultural decadence. It is the spirit of regionalism and all that it carries with it which has filtered into the bone and marrow of our universities. To rescue these "temples of learning" from the cancer that ails them is the task we must face.

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