

The University as an Institution of Early Modern Europe

Critical Reflections on its Self-evidence

By Willem Frijhoff

Beside the modern state itself, the European university boasts of being the oldest institution functioning in Europe without interruption since its beginnings in the Middle Ages. This pretension depends of course on the definition of a university and indeed of higher education. Plato's Academy itself, one thousand five hundred years before the foundation of the first full-fledged European university, has from the start been a luminous icon for the European academic world. Its very idea renovated the university system in the period of humanism, beginning with the foundation of Wittenberg in 1502, the first university in the Holy Roman Empire to call itself an *academia*, therein expressing its clear consciousness of a return to an ages-old value, an ideal, and classical model. Outside Europe, too, in China, India, Persia and the Arabic world for instance, many forms of learning and higher education existed already before the institutionalisation of formal "universities" in medieval Christendom. The Temple School of Jerusalem (*bet midrash*), before its destruction at the fall of the city in 587 B.C., and similar institutions in Egypt, Mesopotamia and elsewhere originated from the need to train scribes to work in the governmental bureaucracies closely linked with religious institutions. It has been contended that several books of the Old Testament, in particular "Ecclesiastes" and "Ecclesiasticus", had in fact been designed or served as textbooks for the Temple School.

In virtually all ancient societies – whenever we know something about their early cultural history – knowledge, skills, and wisdom appear to have been recognised as social goods, used either for the benefit of religion or for the sake of public administration. They have been valued as essential pre-conditions for the well-being and the progress of the community. Their transmission had to be fostered by the corporations immediately concerned (the religious authorities, associations of professionals, etc.) or by the political authorities themselves. Moreover, the standard of knowledge and the quality of its transmission had to be monitored and somehow certified by those responsible for the benefit of a well-ordered society.

Therefore, the difference between the ancient, extra-European forms of organisation of higher learning and the European universities since their establishment in the later centuries of the Middle Ages was not so much to be found in the quality of teaching as in their formal certifications and civil effects. Indeed, *universitas* referred in the later Middle Ages to a *studium generale* whose certificates had universal value within Christendom and whose masters were consequently entitled to teach everywhere on the same footing – although in reality doctrinal discussions, regional networks and local preferences or opportunities could restrict that universal value effectively. Beside the formal universities, other *studia* (often called *studia particularia*) existed, either founded on a purely local or territorial level or established by the religious orders – the corporations entrusted with the transmission of learning of the arts, philosophy and theology. But they could not boast the title of a university because their teaching was not recognized throughout all of Christendom.

In the Christian countries, former non-Christian political regimes or structures may have initially fostered institutional forms of higher education that were not continued under Christian rule, such as the Madrasahs in Arab Spain, at Córdoba, Sevilla, Toledo, Granada, Valencia, and in other Iberian cities. In the Islamic world, Madrasahs, now a general term for Koranic schools of whatever level, had been founded first as institutions of higher education in capital cities like Fez (Al-Qarawiyyin, founded in 859 and claiming to have been the first), Cairo (the Al-Azhar University of 975), Damascus, Aleppo, or Baghdad (Al-Nizamiyyah, around 1065), virtually at the same time that the first full-fledged Christian universities started to emerge. On the formal teaching level, there must have been rather few differences between the Jerusalem Temple School, an Islamic Madrasah or a Chinese Mandarin institution on the one hand, and a European faculty of arts or theological seminary on the other hand.

Early modern practitioners of the history of universities themselves, who count among the very first historians in the modern sense of the word, were well aware of the relative place of European universities in a cultural tradition that encompassed human civilization as a whole. The learned Cologne dean and canon Jacob Middendorp (c. 1537–1611), for instance, prefaced his famous, several-times-reprinted catalogue of European universities in the “*Academiarum orbis Christiani libri duo*” (Cologne, 1567, reprinted and enlarged until 1602) with *Prolegomena* in which he showed that, in the course of classical antiquity, university-like institutions had preceded the formal European university system all around the Mediterranean Sea. At Beirut, Memphis, Heliopolis, Babylon, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Athens, Corinth, Rome, Constantinople and other places, schools of higher learning had existed under the authority of the local governors. Several other early modern scholars, including Jacob Middendorp himself, sketched a university history

starting far before Christianity, some going even back to the postdiluvial era of Noah. In his inaugural lecture “*De Providentia Dei singulari circa Academicarum incrementum*” held at Harderwijk in 1650, Henricus Flockenius (1602–1680), a native of Bremen, went so far as to sketch a history of the university system that reached back to Adam himself, who would have fostered at his home the very first “domestic academy”. The point of his lecture is double: he asserts the antiquity of the academic system and at the same time its huge augmentations in his own time.

As early as 1554, Wolfgang Jobst (Justus, 1521–1573), originally from Frankfurt, provided in his “*Omnium academiarum et quarundam illustrium scholarum totius Europae erectiones, fundationes et confirmations*” a whole catalogue of ancient foundation dates prior to the first formal university. It is quite significant that he did not make a distinction between universities *sensu stricto* and illustrious schools (or *gymnasia academica*). The oldest one in his opinion was the university of Rome, founded around 700 B.C. (!) “*ex Atheniensis Gymnasij reliquijs exorta*” – which establishes nevertheless a distinction between the Greeks’ schooling system and the Romans’, who were considered the real founders of the Western university. The highlight of his argument was therefore not institutional but concerned the level of teaching because, he asserted, the writings of the teachers of this “*doctissimorum virorum emporium et palaestra*”, such as Terentius, Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, Pomponius Atticus, the two Catos, Propertius, Seneca, Persius, Quintilian, and others, were still used as textbooks in the schools and universities of his time. According to Jobst, the second university foundation was that of Bologna in 432 A.D. by Theodosius the Great; the third that of Salisbury, around 470, at the time of King Arthur; the fourth was Cambridge, founded by King Sigebertus in 630; and the fifth foundation took place in 792 when Charlemagne created the University of Paris by translation from Rome – the first phase of the *translatio studii* that would in later centuries repeatedly occupy the world of learning and justify many claims to excellence, privilege, or simply fame.

Nowadays such academic genealogies may make us smile. We may reject them as funny or even pretentious exercises. Before innovating its scholarly approaches altogether in the 1980s and later, the ‘new university history’ made short work of the seemingly dark or exceedingly bright, but always very distant, origins of virtually all the older European universities by restoring a solid foundational history of the whole system. The “*Historical Compendium of European Universities*” (edited by Lubor Jilek, Geneva 1984) and the “*History of the University in Europe*”, prepared under the auspices of the European Rectors’ Conference at Geneva and published in four volumes (1992–2010) by Cambridge University Press under the general direction of Walter Rüegg, have been explicitly conceived and set up to counter the fabulous mythology of distant origins and proud achievements

flourishing in university history, especially at the moment of the centenaries of important or national universities and at other major celebrations. Yet such university mythology speaks of a clear consciousness of antiquity and continuity as central marks of the university system, as well as of the privileges received from and the responsibilities towards society derived from them in the spirit of its administrators and professors. This applies, however, not only to the universities of Western Christianity, because such genealogies and time-rankings play also an important role in the legitimization of the institutions of higher learning in the Islamic world and beyond.

In fact, the universities on the one side and other institutions of higher learning on the other are most often much closer to each other than the discourse of university history and academic prominence wants us to believe. In the common representation of a medieval university in Europe, the general quality of academic teaching is largely overestimated. The great majority of the students, many of them much younger than their present-day colleagues, attended the arts faculty. But until the sixteenth century the arts faculties functioned very much like present-day secondary schools, or were comparable with a high school in the United States education system. It was only after the rise of the grammar schools (*gymnasia*, *collèges*, *colegios*, or Latin schools) as autonomous institutions, formally or actually separated from the university as an established institution, that the arts faculties quickly reduced in numbers and became, by and large, the schools for “higher” education with which we are acquainted. They provided education at a level that, by insisting on its legitimization through a scholarly approach or a scientific method, went beyond the customary values of explanation, imitation, and repetition, and involved some measure of free debate about established wisdom or of autonomous research into texts or other teaching matters.

Still, many important early modern universities maintained much closer ties with the secondary level than we are accustomed to nowadays. This was sometimes the case among the colleges of the English universities, and it was quite typical for the extensive college infrastructures linked with the universities of Paris, Louvain, Cologne, or other similar institutions with their *paedagogia*. A most interesting example is that of the new, all-encompassing educational environment of Prussian Halle, where at the end of the seventeenth century a professional *Ritterschule* (1680) and a new university (1694) were in 1698 completed by the *Franckesche Stiftungen*. Originally an orphanage, this was only meant for lower educational levels, yet it was equally founded within a new spirit of community service and interest in the state, and for foreign observers the whole city was a centre of institutional and intellectual innovation. In such college systems, as in Paris or Louvain, teachers could perform at several levels and the colleges themselves could fulfil different functions – for example residence, teaching, or scholarship – and residence in them could be a determining factor for future careers.

In fact, we must recognise that the formal standard of the “university” label has never remained totally undisputed. The early modern university system has always maintained its own unofficial rankings, in which such major universities as those of Paris, Montpellier, Oxford, Salamanca, Bologna, Orleans, Prague, Krakow, Cologne, Louvain, Basle, Leiden, Halle, Göttingen, and, at the threshold of the modern age, Edinburgh and Berlin, played the role of a mirror and a standard for the quality of other, often minor, and virtually always smaller institutions. In fact, the major universities have repeatedly tried to establish a formal hierarchy among the institutions of higher learning, reserving for themselves certain inalienable rights above others’, forming a kind of informal Ivy-league *avant la lettre*.

The sudden rise of a new teaching and research model, introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Wilhelm von Humboldt at the new university in Berlin and which quickly became an unofficial standard everywhere in Europe (though, as we know, it was much less realized in actual fact than university ideology has often claimed), is a clear example of the widely-felt need for a new standard that could provoke new Europe-wide rankings and indeed a new European university consciousness. In this sense, the Humboldtian university model marked a return to the need for European university standards to go beyond the purely national functions that, by and large, had dominated the early modern European universities. Yet at the same time the Humboldtian model resulted from the on-going perfection during a long, early modern evolution towards a national system of higher education perfectly adapted to national needs and national culture. And Humboldt was not the only innovator. The historical evolution of the European university has isolated him by proving the value of his contribution in light of the advancement of science, but around 1810 another solution was simultaneously elaborated: the French one, with discipline-specific schools. This solution would inspire the subsequent creation of the great technical universities and schools for the development of officials at the service of the nation.

Indeed, national university policies had shaped a national professorial market, national certification systems, and even national teaching contents and didactics, partly as a consequence of the confessional division of Europe, partly in the wake of the rise of strong independent states with expanding bureaucracies and closing borders. To name only some of these internal evolutions of the academic world: professional examinations of candidates for the holy ministry by the Protestant church authorities became a rule in many countries during the early modern period, partly because the Churches always mistrusted the autonomy of the universities (and the consequences this may have had for the purity of doctrine), and partly because university learning drifted away from pastoral care; entrance examinations for public service were introduced in the eighteenth century in Scandinavia (Denmark

1736, Sweden 1759); a growing range of measures and examinations for lawyers and public officials entering state service, including practical training courses, was elaborated in Prussia during the eighteenth century; state-conferred teaching certifications, such as the *agrégation* (1766), were introduced in France.

At first glance, the eighteenth century seems to be the dullest century in university history and in a certain sense this was the very quintessence of 'Alteuropa'. Matriculations decreased dramatically and many students attended the university just to obtain a quick degree. The university became either a family business or the closed playing field of an ever-smaller pool of elites, grouped around or controlled by the territorial princes and their ministers, the churches, and their schooling requirements. Science and scholarship migrated increasingly towards the learned societies and academies, not to forget the quickly increasing number of reading rooms and societies for a non-academic public. New media, like the learned journals and the encyclopaedias, took the place of older, university-bound forms of knowledge diffusion, and the whole concept of a *Respublica Litterarum*, the world of learning, was hugely challenged by the new intellectuals of the Enlightenment, either from a straightforwardly philosophical perspective or one more politically and culturally oriented. The very function of the university as a creative centre of European scholarship was put into jeopardy.

Yet the eighteenth century really was the century of university reform *par excellence* and a challenge to the supposed fixity of the 'Alteuropa' concept. A quick look at what happened in many European countries will suffice to show that the *Ancien Régime* was dying at the university long before the revolutions put it to a violent end. In the course of the eighteenth century, in virtually all the absolutist monarchies of Europe, university reforms or university creations were performed in a nationalizing sense. The first of them, clearly political in nature, came about in Catalonia after the fall of Barcelona in 1714; all seven universities of the former autonomous region were suppressed and teaching was concentrated in a government-controlled university at the small market-town of Cervera, where Jesuit influence was notable. In Russia, Peter the Great created in 1724 at St. Petersburg an academy-annex-university that brought a new university structure in his empire. In Hanover, Göttingen University was created in 1737; soon it became known as the most innovative academic institution in Europe, attracting numerous students of high social quality from everywhere and exerting a considerable influence on the innovation of scholarship and on the increase of government officials and civil servants with modern university training.

The whole university system was reformed in Piedmont, in 1729, when Victor Amadeus adjusted the supply of education to the actual demand for state officials, priests, lawyers, and physicians and created training courses for new professionals (engineers, architects, surgeons, and other para-uni-

versity professions). Apart from Piedmont, substantial and ideologically-based reforms took place in Portugal (Coimbra 1759), Spain (1769), Poland (1773), Austria and the Austrian Netherlands (1774–77 under Maria Theresa and again under Joseph II), Naples (1777), Prussia (1779), Württemberg (the creation of the Hohe Karlsschule according to an entirely new professional concept in 1781), in Russia again (1782), and finally in France, where in 1793 all the universities were simultaneously suppressed and replaced by a small number of professional schools for selected social functions – an operation that was repeated in later years in the countries (the Low Countries, Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.) conquered by or put under the influence of the French revolutionaries and their successor, Napoleon Bonaparte. Even the countries in the northern part of Europe, where apparently nothing endangered the status quo of the universities, were touched by extensive debates about the value of science and scholarship and by national versions of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* that had brought France and the French-speaking literary communities of Europe to an uproar after its start by Charles Perrault in the early 1690s. In fact, in this debate, the whole modernization of the university system was at stake, and it is probably revealing of the *Ancien Régime* university that the debate did not start inside the university itself but in literary circles linked not to its academic teaching practice but closer to its cultural policy at large.

All these institutional acts and social movements testify not only to the growing inadequacies of university teaching for professional training during the *Ancien Régime* and the distrust of the authorities towards the social use of university scholarship, but also to an increasing diversification of the universal field of knowledge into nationally-compartmentalized disciplines. After their first introduction at Halle and Frankfurt an der Oder in 1727, for example, the *Cameralwissenschaften* (cameralism, or administrative sciences) became the particular way in which, from Germany to Austria and Switzerland, the German-speaking lands within the orbit of the Holy Roman Empire modelled the development of their civil servants, from high to low, within the old university system but using a new, national type of teaching and learning.

Similarly, the new scientific disciplines that received their formal disciplinary shape in the course of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries initially developed in a typically localized context. That was the case of economics, statistics, physics, ethnology, psychology, modern history, and linguistics. They answered primarily to regional or, at most, national needs. In the academic shape in which they initially spread over Europe, they quite often continued bearing such national characteristics, and the nation that had created them remained for a long time the place of reference for all scholarly work in that domain. It was only in the long run, in fact not before the twentieth century, that the truly international character

of science and scholarship became again an important asset of the European university and of its offspring on other continents, just as it had been in the late Middle Ages before the separation between the lower and the higher educational levels. Confessional divisions and the rise of the nation states provided the educational landscape with many instruments for the division of the university system into a multitude of autonomous segmentations, more or less closed off and often protected by legislation that excluded foreigners, heretics or students with insufficient money, status or other preconditions.

A case in point of national ambitions is the University of Leiden, a relatively young university founded in 1575 but established as the monopolistic institution of the joint provinces of Holland and Zeeland in the Dutch Republic. After some initial hesitations about the character of the institution – should it merely be a Calvinist theological school or a full-fledged humanistic university, as its initial title “*academia*” promised from the beginning? – the subsequent flourishing of Leiden University in the wake of the Dutch Golden Age brought the university’s administrators to a double contention. On the one side they tried to monopolize all forms of higher teaching in the two provinces affected by its degree monopoly and to prevent the foundation of other *studia*, even if they had no intention of conferring degrees (as was the case of the illustrious school or *atheneum* of Amsterdam, founded after a famous and tumultuous lawsuit with Leiden University in the early 1630s). On the other side, they overtly fostered the idea of a hierarchy of all the universities in the Dutch Republic, with Leiden at the top, as a proto-“national” university in a country in which the character of the ‘nation’ still had to be defined.

We detect therefore several limits to the self-evidence pronounced in the monopolistic claims to excellence and continuity by the university system of ‘*Alteuropa*’. As the growing number of university catalogues published in several European countries during the *Ancien Régime* clearly shows, the status of quite a lot of universities was uncertain, especially abroad, where the founding authority could be a prince of smaller importance or even a local council. Some universities were considered simple higher schools. Others, including a high-level *gymnasium academicum* like Herborn, the Calvinist academy of Geneva, the Huguenot academies of Saumur and Sedan, major Jesuit schools like the ones at Lyons or Milan, or the *athenea illustria* of Amsterdam and Deventer, were in the eyes of many observers entirely equivalent to real universities. The trajectories followed by the students on the *grand tour* make clear that they made virtually no distinction between, on the one hand, a formal university, a military school (or *Ritterakademie*), a *gymnasium academicum*, academy, seminary, grand college, or higher school of any kind, and, on the other hand, cities without a university but where forms of qualified education were delivered, in institutions, by corporations of lawyers, physicians, engineers, or others. This happened in London, and

because of the number of such institutions, the city was called “the third university of the kingdom”. In fact, in the eyes of these observers, the quality of teaching counted much more than a formal university status. The irony was, of course, that the degree one needed for professional practice could only be obtained at formally established universities enjoying a degree monopoly.

For this requirement, too, the *Ancien Régime*, with its empirical mentality towards learning, had found a suitable solution. Not all the universities enjoyed the same high reputation. Some institutions, though formally established as full-fledged universities, could barely boast of being effective centres of scholarship, either because their teaching quality was considered too low with respect to the main centres of learning or because their main function was certification without a corresponding teaching assignment. This was the case in the seventeenth century among the German Nations of the universities of Bourges and Orleans, later on at Harderwijk, and in the eighteenth century at Rheims or Duisburg – which were formal university centres that granted degrees without providing classroom instruction. Some of these degree-granting institutions were organically inserted into the *grand tour* or the *peregrinatio academica* itself, like Orleans, Bourges, Angers or Caen, while others were the destination of a small trip abroad just for the sake of the degree, like Rheims or Duisburg.

In daily life, an important limit of the university system was therefore its formal distinction against the range of schools immediately below it: the *gymnasia* or Latin schools. The growing uncertainty this limit actually brought about was a consequence of the humanist revival of classical studies and the rise of literate town *bourgeoisies* in the highly urbanized regions of Europe (Italy, the Mediterranean border, the Rhineland, the Hanseatic towns on the continent and along the shores of the Baltic Sea, the Netherlands, and parts of England). In the literate strata of such cities and in particular among the ruling elites (and even among the merchants themselves), a classical education barely different from the arts curriculum was considered an important asset for political life, that is, before it was made compulsory in the eighteenth century for town councillors and officials to obtain a law degree. The consequence of this social requirement was a multiplication of schools where such a prolonged education could be obtained, preferably close by home: from the *modus parisiensis* and the Sturmiian model (based on the late-medieval Dutch model and developed in the early sixteenth century at Strasbourg) and the *gymnasia academica* (popular among the Protestants and Catholics alike) to the illustrious schools of the Netherlands and of Central Europe. The whole domain of such forms of post-elementary education should therefore be taken together in order to establish an objective evaluation of the academic landscape in ‘*Alteuropa*’.

It is during the early modern period, in conjunction with the rise of the nation state, that the idea of the university as a purely medieval, indeed a

late medieval, creation arose. The definition is important: characteristic for the early modern university is, first and foremost, the reach of the disciplines taught, from the arts and theology to law and medicine, but without formal engineering, surgery, or other skills associated with manual work. These, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had to first constitute themselves as academic disciplines before being admitted to the university on the same footing as already-established disciplines. Significantly, when Prince Maurice of Orange founded in 1600 the engineer's school at Leiden, it had to be next to the university, operating in its buildings but without a formal integration into the university curriculum; and teaching was in the vernacular language, for the sake of another type of student: one without classical training. The other characteristic of the early modern university, as it defined itself, is the fact that its certifications (the different degrees) were formally recognized beyond the frontiers of the political territories. Research is a later addition: although university professors were formally researchers in their own right on a personal level, and although many early modern observers considered the goal of teaching to be the advancement of the state of the humanities and sciences, it was only in exceptional cases (as with the Leiden research professors Scaliger or Salmasius) that research was one of the formal tasks of a university teacher.

All in all, the apparent unity and continuity of the university model, as well as the university structures in pre-modern Europe, are in fact very tricky, because this institutional continuity hides fundamental changes in functions (education, social), content (scholarship, science) and meaning (culture), not only Europe-wide, but also between emerging (and changing!) countries. One could even state that durable institutional unity permitted these changes, since it legitimated a certain formal relation between the university and the religious or political powers, which was advantageous for all. Focussing on the Holy Roman Empire alone, as would be typical for the '*Alt-europa*'-concept, is in that respect misleading. The whole European university system worked on the same footing and moved in the same direction, even at the same rhythm. No wonder that the whole European university system collapsed together around 1800 (except in Great Britain, decidedly not a European state) and had to be reinvented anew in almost all the European countries, this time in a narrowly national institutional context, but with new European dimensions in learning (Humboldt), education (Bildung), social functions (for the professions), and cultural roles (for civilisation).

Further reading

Rüegg, Walter (Hrsg.), A History of the University in Europe, 4 Bde., Cambridge 1992–2010.