

# THE UNIVERSITIES OF EUROPE IN THE NEW ERA

## A COMMENT

by **Dimitris Michalopoulos\***

### Abstract

*The 1968 student crisis in France was the symptom of a rampant moral and intellectual disease; for the European universities were no longer adapted to meet the necessities of the societies that had invented them. In point of fact, the etymon of the term “university” is the mediaeval Latin word *universitas*, i.e. the erroneous translation of the Greek term *encyclopaedia*; and *encyclopaedia* means a general, advanced education capable of giving rise to the *homo universalis*. These *homines universales* were regarded as the natural leaders of traditional, hierarchically organized societies as were those before the French Enlightenment. Therefore, the very issue which the 1968 crisis raised was the one tackled as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century mainly in France and Russia: Does a modern European society need universities or highly specialized schools? The time now seems ripe to opt for the second solution.*

**Keywords:** *Universities – 1968 uprising – hierarchical societies – Greek Church - Sublime Porte- Walachia and Moldavia*

### Introduction

Above the main entrance of a famous university, in Spain, there is an eloquent Greek inscription which reads as follows: “The Kings to the Encyclopaedia. The Encyclopaedia to the Kings”. The sovereigns in question are Ferdinand and Isabel, i.e. the famous “Catholic Kings”. So, the very term “encyclopaedia” might be considered to be an enigma; but it is not, because this word was the one initially used for to-day’s expression “university”.

As a matter of fact, the term “university”, which derives from the Latin *universitas*, is no more than an unsuccessful translation of the Greek term “encyclopaedia”; for “encyclopaedia” has – but from a merely intellectual point of view - the same meaning as *universitas*. The latter expresses generally the idea of a “whole”, whereas the former expresses a “whole” but a specified one; in other words a complete education. The distortion of the term *encyclopaedia*’s meaning during the Age of Enlightenment (and mainly through the French language) must not thereby allow its essential significance to fall into oblivion.

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In brief, encyclopaedia/university means the place where a human being is able to acquire a complete education in order to have an adamant character and succeed in becoming a *homo universalis*. Nonetheless, the question that emerges after this clarification is: Why so? The answer is simple: so as to equip one to become a top civil servant or a well-paid lawyer. This is at least my summing-up of the study of the history of the (so – to – speak) ‘early universities’, both ancient and mediaeval.

It was the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180 AD) who established the first university of Europe in Athens. His idea was clear-cut: philosophy could provide the means of governing human beings. So, he created a university consisting of two “Schools”, i.e. a Philosophic and a Sophistic one. In the former the four main streams of ancient thinking were taught; namely, the Platonism, the Aristotelianism, the Stoicism and the Epicurianism. Students of both Schools, however, were provided with elements of History, Mathematics and Medicine. The professors received a regular (and high) salary from the emperor’s treasury<sup>1</sup>; nonetheless, the students had to pay fees for their tuition; and after having covered the curriculum, they could apply for high-ranking posts within the government apparatus.

As a result, Athens became the intellectual and, in some respects, the spiritual centre of the empire; while Rome was and, of course, remained the administrative one. In other words, it was quite natural for the emperor Decius to make as early as the mid-third century the famous statement: “I would prefer to have in Rome another emperor rather than the Pope”<sup>2</sup>; for the Christian Church was so rich and influential in the Eternal City as to covet already the imperial power. Nonetheless, the situation was quite different in Athens. Because of the university’s existence, the Christian religion could never achieve real progress in Attica and, generally speaking, the whole of Greece. Greek philosophers and sophists, in fact, persisted in professing paganism as late as the 6<sup>th</sup> century; thus the emperor Justinian I the Great (527–565) was compelled to impose Christianity on Athens through an edict: he simply stopped the pay of the university professors; therefore the university was closed down, and the ‘academics’ emigrated. The significance of this story is not at all an ‘occult’ one: the university is the stronghold of the State ideology<sup>3</sup>; and if the State succumbs, so does the university. Christians, in fact, were not allowed to teach in the university of the pagan Roman empire; as a corollary, Athens university would be abolished once the imperial authority converted to Christianity. Another university must educate the higher civil servants of the renovated empire; and as a matter of fact, one had already been established during the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

## II

The role of the universities as the means of elaboration and the propagation of an official ideology were emphasized in the Middle-Ages, the era of their proliferation throughout Central and Western Europe. In a continent where the nation was by no means recognized as an essential ‘form’ of the State and at a time when the Roman Pope was regarded as the ‘supreme’

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<sup>1</sup> One, engaged in the Sophistic School, from the City of Athens.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Renan, *Marc Aurèle et la fin du monde antique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy [1912<sup>16</sup>]), p. 520.

<sup>3</sup> See among others: V. H. H. Green., *The Universities* (Penguin Books, 1969), p.16.

sovereign, it sounds logical enough that the universities under the aegis of the spiritual authority should elaborate church doctrine and produce ecclesiastics<sup>4</sup>. As a matter of fact, the universities were, initially, nothing more than clerical brotherhoods<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, it was then that the real problem of academic life emerged: Are research and reasoning compatible with the universities' function as means of elaboration and propagation of a given ideology? If they are, how can authority 'oust' subversive ideas or findings? And if they are not, how can society rid itself of this strange contradiction?

In point of fact, this is the key not merely to the academic life but to intellectual one as a whole; and, strangely enough, this tricky issue was handled better in the Middle-Ages than it has been in our time. The new ideas and concepts were then sorted out and, if proved powerful enough, incorporated in the ideological mainstream. The harmonization of Aristotelian thought with the Christian notion of the world achieved by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a masterly – and risky – intellectual pirouette<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, several centuries later in several parts of Europe an obvious gap had opened up between State ideology and academic thought; the universities lost therefore their efficiency and the very problem they constitute fully emerged. The first signs of this gap were seen in Germany and Austria after the fall of Napoleon and the collapse of the French Empire. The student bodies wanted a national Germanic kingdom, i.e. a united Germany, but this aim was in stark contrast to the interests of the dynasties ruling the then large number of German states. The patent antithesis brought about assassinations, oppressive measures, establishment of police régimes and so on and so forth. Nonetheless the problem was now perfectly clear. If the universities' "task is to supply the country with civil servants, administrators and technologists"<sup>7</sup>, what calibre of "civil servants" and "administrators" would the German universities supply to the dynastic states of which Germany was then made up?

The root of the 1968 uprising in Paris is to be found in this very problem: Where are the limits between so-called 'academic liberty' and State needs? For the universities must be "more or less closely correlated to national needs"<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, given that this criterion is somewhat vague, the problem may be couched in another way: Where are the limits of knowledge to be found? And moreover who is empowered to fix such limits?

Strangely enough, an answer to this crucial dilemma is provided by Ottoman History. As a matter of fact, in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and the early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the university of Padua in Italy was very popular among the influential strata of Greek society; and given that this city was then included in the territory of the "Most Serene Republic of Venice", Orthodox Christians from the Venetian dominions either in the Archipelago or the Ionian Sea wished to study there – and eventually they did. One among them was Cyril Lucar, from Candia, the future patriarch of Constantinople; another was a certain Theophilus Corydalleus, an obscure clergyman but a notorious philosopher. Nonetheless, the ideological mainstream in Padua at that time was Neo-Aristotelianism, as professed by Cesare Cremonini, a materialist theoretician. So, when the "Patriarchal Academy", i.e. a quasi-university, was established in the Ottoman capital,

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<sup>4</sup> "The medieval university existed to train churchmen, canonists, monks and friars, schoolmen and schoolmasters" (*ibidem*).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Muammer İskenderoğlu, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas on the question of the eternity of the world* (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 2002), p. 125 ff. *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> V. H. H. Green., *The Universities*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

Corydalleus was put at its head; as a result, thanks to the approbation of the Greek–Orthodox Church, materialism began to spread throughout the Balkan peninsula<sup>9</sup>.

To study how and why materialism could be taught by a Christian Church would be beyond the scope of this paper. The point is, however, that materialism was transplanted from the capital to the Danubian Principalities, Walachia and Moldavia, thanks to the Phanariots on whom – from the second decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – the administration of these lands was bestowed by the Sublime Porte. In other words, because of the curricula of the Academies that, on the model of the Patriarchal one, were established in the Danubian Principalities, materialism became the official ideology of an important part of the South – East of Europe<sup>10</sup>. Of course this was all but contrary to any concept of ‘national interest’ or ‘national will’. And as could easily be foreseen, this had a fatal impact on the evolution of the Romanian people.

The case of the Patriarchal Academy illustrates the very problem of the universities in the Modern Era, namely: What is the *raison d’être* for young people to receive higher education? In order to become top clerks in an ecclesiastical or state apparatus? And what if they profess an ideology contrary to that of the apparatus they are supposed to serve? In Greece, for instance, during the 1920’s and the 1930’s, the university of Athens was the main cradle of Marxism, whereas the Republic and (from 1935 on) the Kingdom were based on idealistic conceptions of social and national life<sup>11</sup>. This is why the French and the Russian experience can provide solutions to this problem valid even to-day.

In France, under the Third and the Fifth Republics it was decided that specialized civil servants would be educated –and trained– in the so-called *Grandes Écoles*: *numerus clausus* and therefore competition and an austere way of life guaranteed that people with a degree from those Schools would be highly qualified civil servants – and, needless to say, faithful to the government they were going to serve. The universities, on the other hand, were practically open to everybody; nonetheless it was doubtful whether young people with a ‘typical’ university degree would be able to find a job in the civil service; moreover, if they were able to find one, it remained doubtful whether they could hold it down till the end of their active life. The 1968 riots in Paris brought out this fact, and the very strict examination system was abolished; therefore the gates of unemployment swung open for the youth of the country. In the imperial Russia moreover years of discussions took place on what system of higher education should be established. The monarchists proposed ‘Institutes’, approximately close up to the French *Grandes Écoles* but with an even stricter system of education and way of life. The liberals, on the other hand, wished universities run more or less along the lines of the Western ones. The

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<sup>9</sup> See mainly Cléobule Tsourkas, *Les débuts de l’enseignement philosophique et de la libre pensée dans les Balkans. La vie et l’oeuvre de Théophile Corydalée (1570 – 1646)*, Salonika: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1967, pp.17, 23, 95.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 24, 195.

<sup>11</sup> Albeit that the ministry of Public Instruction had also the charge of all religious matters. As a fact, even during the ‘dark days’ of the Greek Revolution (1821-1829) and the subsequent financial difficulties which were the direct consequence, the cause of public instruction was never forsaken nor yet even partially neglected in Greece. From the 1830’s up to the early 1980’s the Greek system of education was the same as the German in organization; afterwards it was more or less ‘Americanized’. It is noteworthy moreover that most of the professors of the university of Athens had taken their degrees or had completed their studies abroad - that is to say in either Great Britain, Germany, France, or the U.S.A.

latter prevailed; and as could easily be foreseen, a large number of students turned into enemies of the monarchy until finally they proved able to undermine it.

## Conclusion

May the following serve as a conclusion to this brief historical analysis: The university is a mediaeval institution; and its roots can be traced back to Antiquity, during which the Middle-Ages were being forged. Therefore is doubtful whether the university, as an educational institution of primary importance, is able to serve the needs of the New Era. Why? First of all, because its function presupposes not only a vast imperial, oecumenical statehood but also a full conformity between the burgeoning student and scholar growing up on campus and government needs. If there is a gap between the very ideology on which statehood is based – and the ideas professed in the university – the result is social conflict and eventually the partial or total collapse of a country: De Gaulle's fall in 1969 and the 1975 American army's defeat in Vietnam might well be considered to be two typical cases. In other words, the university exists for the nation or, more conclusively, the Faith; and by no means do the country and religion exist for the university.

In the views of many, we are all fuelling the nations' eclipse; nonetheless the global state that is supposed to be created will not be (if such an experiment proves successful) a unified one. Unification presupposes a common language, and a common faith, and eventually a common way of life. To-day it is doubtful whether the majority of universities meet the virtual needs of society; in other words, they practically constitute a world apart. Thanks to the grants given them by governments, in most cases they live in 'brilliant isolation', the result of which is arrogance, absurdity, and sometimes madness...And last but not least, they feed unemployment – the Damoclean sword of our Western world. With the exception of a few universities in Russia and America, it is very difficult to assert that research is going on as it was thirty years ago. In short, the universities, as far as the Western World is concerned, lead society no more. On the contrary, they prove to be demoralizing, debilitating factors; therefore it is time once more to recall that the function of universities is to serve the society.

### *What should be done? I think the following:*

a) First of all, the abolition of the notorious 'academic asylum'. In point of fact, such was fully established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in the German universities, in order to provide protection for students and teachers struggling for a national identity. To-day, the universities are, in the main majority, openly hostile not merely to nationalism but to nationhood as a whole. Therefore, the prohibition placed on the police from entering campuses, is in our time, nothing more than a pretext to make the trafficking in drugs easier and put an official stamp on the implementation of absurdities.

b) Instead of so-called 'academic freedom', a stricter connection should be established between the higher educational system and the national government. And from this point of view the –usual- confusion between government and administration must be avoided. European or, generally speaking, supra-national directives must be channeled through national governments and by no means directly to universities.

c) The proliferation of institutes providing a highly specialized education is recommended. In fact, to-day the mediaeval, hierarchical society exists only in the United Kingdom; that is why the universities of Oxford and Cambridge prosper even now. Throughout the rest of Europe any kind of hierarchical society has disappeared; as a result, keeping higher education in the same tracks as six centuries ago simply does not make sense. As far as we can see, society in our time needs highly specialized people with a good humanistic education as well. We need people who not only can do things, i.e. act, but who are able to have an overview of the society they live in.

These are the first measures to be taken in order to achieve the synchronization of higher education with social life. Nonetheless, this is a debate about to open now; and a lot of ideas must be mulled and discussed before proceeding to a virtual reformation.