

## Higher Education – a Basis for Progress and Democracy in the Globalized World of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century\*

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Half a century ago, Pink Floyd attained an explosive success singing “*We don’t Need No Education*”. In 1968, students making riots in the American campuses or the great European universities were shouting, as democratically as possible, “*il est interdit d’interdire*”. Even closer, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in Paris, groups of rebel youngsters put on fire not just cars or police stations. They also fired schools and destroyed buildings of universities in Paris, starting with Sorbonne, the symbol of the letters republic in Europe and in the world. Democracy generated thus, in our present times, policies that brought about an unprecedented expansion of the education as system, but also led to anarchic explosions of protests against the expanding system. But why?

We can understand that any educational process is also a process of “taming” of which Plato called *the wild part of the human being*, so it is absolutely natural to face a certain resistance from the beneficiaries. We can understand that the European youth aspire to have all the advantages of a competitive world, but refuse its uncertainties. We can see that in a society that made higher education the main social elevator, education is challenged in the very moment when the elevator is no longer operational. We might become sad, or we could try to resume the discussion from its origins, back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which invested education, and particularly the academic one, with the position of engine of the meritocratic system instead of the old system of hereditary elites of the aristocratic regimes.

It may be possible that hostility against the school as we see it sometimes today to come from observing that the educational system is disconnected from the realities of the contemporary society. I do not refer here to the often called-upon adjustments to the labour market requirements. Numerous experiences and experiments have proven that the maximum adaptation to these exigencies is not absorbed by the young beneficiaries of an early specialized education, even through the computer information or other modern disciplines, but, on the contrary, by those who have passed through a formation intelligently cantered on the traditional fundamentals of science and culture and who thus gain a flexibility that allows them to further choose the highest fields within the professional “hunting field.”

A higher education for a democratic society in the 21st century – here is a topic we can talk about either in prefabricated formulas and as *politically correct* as possible or, on the contrary, in formulas we can profoundly reflect upon in an attempt to comprehend not only what connects the two concepts: democracy and higher education, but also what might disunite them, even contradict them. What should we do if we want these two concepts to enhance each other? I believe that we should start by giving up elaborating utopian solutions governed by demagoguery and populism and that, in the last century, led to the communist dictatorial regimes. Education alone cannot solve the issue of youth unemployment if not accompanied by a radical transformation of the economy level, in the way that it generates jobs according to the knowledge society and not to the industrial society characterizing the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the speculative tendencies of the present that is not stimulating a real economy growth.

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We should stop using utopian assertions such as: eradicating unemployment or poverty, at least during the next decade. Unemployment is also a consequence of freedom (especially freedom of movement and of the individual right to decide on his own life) characteristic to democracy, to the scientific and technological progress. What we can propose to do is to limit them in a society where Eastern oligarchy and Western plutocracy should be replaced by a truly meritocratic democracy.

A democratic society does not deny or dissolve its elites, but uses them for the common benefit, making them accessible to any citizen willing to use his talent and abilities to reach as far as possible on his chosen path. Thus, it is not about increasing the number of schools that produce specialized robots on the assembly line from earliest ages. It is not about mechanically applying to all the students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - the templates and the criteria of the 19th century school, which was addressing at not most than 5 % of a generation. It is not about feeding them up with a cannon invented by pedagogues contemporary to Napoleon and Dickens and not with post-modern thinkers, that we will build the 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy. One of the most noxious illusions of the present times is mistakenly addressing mass education as democratization of the educational system. In the countries of the former socialist space, which were under the USSR reign, we have experienced the cultural massification through a distorted and at the same time under-financed educational system, with pupils and students trapped in an equalizing assessment mechanism that systematically neglected the theoretical and human sciences for the exclusive benefit of standard practical occupations. You cannot imagine the despair many of us in Eastern Europe felt when seeing the same hard errors that generated harsh consequences, are now being repeated in the name of the “knowledge-based economy” and of a laxity mistakenly considered as democracy.

In order to avoid these expensive confusions, we must re-invent the school in such a way that it will know how to preserve and use the passionate interest for exploration, for the new, and for knowledge. To be a school that transforms every child’s passion for stories into an ability to use adequate words, a school that puts in service of the didactic process all the childhood colourful fantasy, the explosive inventiveness of the adolescence. Shortly, I’m talking about a school as the joy of learning. Such a school integrates and does not compete with the almost infinite information means that today’s society is fast developing.

We must re-invent the school so that it will not exclude, but include: to take into account every child’s and teenager’s talents, to offer them a customized path that will bring out the best of every student’s personality. Under the circumstances of the informatics and information revolutions, the biggest effort necessary to radically re-invent the school is not the one involving **economic** effort, but one concerning the **intellectual** effort. Universities, which are, at the same time, beneficiaries of the educational process and its latest achievement, have the duty to reflect upon this vital issue and to fight for a real democracy based on knowledge and for a new humanism, capable to radically rebuild the contemporary society.

Will this process be assumed by our democracies? Will the families, the local communities, the mayors, the counselors of different sectors, or even the members of our parliaments, be willing to take the chance to support and finance such a radical reform, to open the way of an custom made, flexible education, able to mould itself on any child’s needs and potential? Maybe the issue of financing education could tame the budget restraints in a manner only apparently paradoxical, and not through restricting the access to studies, including higher education, but on the contrary, through a larger and democratic opening of the school gates at all levels. At least these will be the result if we take into consideration the conclusions of a study made by McKinsey Consulting Company on studies in the United States. The study starts from a Report presented in 1983 entitled *A Nation at Risk*, which was drawing attention even from that time to the danger of an increasing mediocrity within the US educational system. The study calculates what would have been the possible earnings, during the past 25 years after the Report, if the measures proposed at that time

would have been implemented. **If the United States would had attained even since 1998 the educational performance of Finland, the GDP of the United States in 2008 would have been higher with at least 1,3 and even up to 2,3 trillion dollars.** If the graduates from disadvantaged ethno-cultural groups such as Afro-Americans and Latinos would have reached their white colleagues level since 1998, the United States GDP would have been in 2008 bigger by an amount between 310 and 525 billion dollars; and if the difference between the quality of education for youngsters coming from families with poor income compared to the education for the rest of the population would have had decreased 10 years ago, the GDP in 2008 would have risen by an amount between 400 and 670 billion dollars.

I do not know if such studies have been made for European countries. What I do know, without any statistics, is that in my country there are many talented adolescents that never succeed to accomplish their potential because of an unhappy combination of objective – basically economic related – and subjective situations, especially related to the family and social environment they live in, and that, for many reasons, do not offer them the enthusiasm, the motivation and the support necessary to perform in an educational system built on the excellency principles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such a system automatically isolates them because it is based on inflexible performance assessment principles: just to give a simple example of one of the most complex situation, a child having a perfect ear for music, but with no native talent for mathematics has no chance to become prize-winning pupil. If, on top of that, he comes from a disadvantaged environment, the chances of dropping out school astronomically increase.

Any project of education reform should comprise innovative ideas, but also financing solutions. One of the most beautiful legends in the world, the legend of the Argonauts, tells the story of 50 heroes in the Ancient Greece, among them Jason, Hercules and Orpheus, who were searching on the shores of that sea for the Golden Fleece, a symbol of wealth, power, and maybe even happiness. The first character they met on their journey was Phineus, who was empowered by Gods with the ability to predict the future. However, the Gods feared of his enormous power blinded him, so Phineus, who could see the future, was no able to see the present he was living in. Moreover, despite having always in front of him a table full of food, some birds of prey called Harpies stole his food, so he would remain forever hungry. Phineus also had the capacity of finding solutions to the problems in the future. Thus, in exchange for the Argonauts chasing away the harpies, he taught them how to sail through the Bosphorus straight, which rocks were clashing everyone who was heading from there to Pontus Euxinus. The story of Phineus appears to me instructive for those who have the mission to lead and reform the higher education system, but who sometimes, focusing on anticipating the changes, might risk to lose contact with the present, or eve more, lose the founds necessary to finance their visionary and strategic projects.

There is no doubt – the most profitable investment is the one made in the educational system, under an essential condition – that financing should increase and not restrain both the democratic basis of the academic institutions and communities, or their contribution to the democratic development of the society.

One of the issues that bother more and more the academic communities in the world and the societies which developed them is, in the last years, the topic of **world-class universities**. The tough competition generated has reached also the academic milieu long ago, but now this competition has elaborated its instruments, concepts and weapons, and has become obvious even for the public opinion, much more sensitive towards the Olympics environment – or the one of a boxing match – between the world university centres rather than towards the essence of the issue: what means a worldwide competitive university? Why should we make the effort to enroll our own universities in this race and at what price?

It is not only about money, although we are talking about a great amount of money. A study made by The World Bank in collaboration with EBRD entitled *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities* (Washington 2009), demonstrates with irrefutable figures the existence of a direct relationship between the level of general financing of the high universities of the Shanghai top, and the professor's remunerations, research grants, and the excellency of the accomplished performances. Obviously, a research team that attracted huge grants in the past had all the chances to do it also in the future. A laboratory led by a Nobel Prize laureate attracts - most of the time for good reasons – significantly higher funds than those allotted to a quasi-anonymous laboratory located in Eastern Europe.

We, the Eastern university professors are coming from a different background when compared to the world of open competition for grants. Of course, in the communist regimes there was a struggle for power between political groups, having branches within the intellectuals: let me mention here the example of sociology, forbidden for a period, rehabilitated then for a few years, and then isolated again from 1978. In its essence, the arbitrary of distributing the resources was coming from the ideological options of the communist party. Thus, the massive support enjoyed by the technical sciences reflected a very simple idea: “the bigger the number of engineers there are, the greater the production can be.” In 1990, 67 % of the university graduates in Romania were engineers, and all the rest – physicians, professors, jurists, military, artists, even priests – were sharing the 33 % left, according to those requirements. On the other hand, in the communist system, a researcher could have been sure that, unless breaking the party rules, he could obtain financing for the research he wanted (or a modest, but comfortable, life of miming research with a big economy of effort). We had the opportunity to critically examine the way in which were organized the research, as well as the university studies on the whole, which were imposed us by a political system to which we did not adhere. But we have also the capacity to see the weak points of the competition-based system developed in the universities of the Western democracies.

The terms used within academic competition in the contemporary world have many outstanding qualities, not the last one being to low the level of subjectivism, abuses - not to mention the absurdities generated by the political guiding of the intellectual life. However, it does not mean that we would live in a perfect world. Far from me the thought of denying the virtues of academic competition. In essence, it is an effect of democracy: in Athens, not only the great architectural projects like the Parthenon or the Propylaeas, but also the leading literary works written by great poets and playwrights of the Age of Pericles, were financially supported following a public debate organized in the People's Assembly.

Taken from this perspective, the present financing system of the universities in Central and South Eastern Europe dramatically points out the inequalities inherited from the recent past: even though the new democracies governments allocate 5 or even 6 percent of their GDP to education, we are talking about a modest GDP and about a system that has been poorly financed for decades. The research programs the new EU members have access to rectify the gaps only in a partial manner, and, on the other hand, they also import within the system their traditional imbalances – between the “tough” and the “soft” sciences, between theory and practice, between the Anglo-Saxon traditional system and the continental one. Last, but not least, the imbalances between the national element and the one of internationalizing higher education. On the other hand, the brain drain activated right after the end of the Cold War, generated an exodus of brains from Central Europe and former USSR territories towards Western Europe and the USA, far bigger than the phenomenon happened after WW2, from Western Europe to the US. Paradoxically, Eastern former communist poor countries have intellectually sponsored the competitive Western economies.

Of the many distortions of the present, I will choose only one, the one that places at risk traditional fields of excellence of the Euro-Atlantic academic community. However we speak mainly about

less expensive fields, that requires just a few books and a computer or even because of that, a great part of the humanistic sciences, particularly those situated beyond the acute now-to-date characteristics to which are often subjected the projections regarding education and research, are less and less supported in the study and financing programs. The history of civilizations, the languages of the old documents, the rare languages, the history of philosophy may become, in today's society, endangered species of knowledge. And this is happening also because of the power games of the decision makers in the academic milieu itself. In Eastern European countries, during communist times, for 50 years, it has been constantly repeated that these were bourgeois prejudices, while today in Western countries the decisions are being taken by generations post-'68, with all their qualities, but also all their post-colonial and post-modern prejudices. But this is happening also as a consequence of democratizing decisions and labour market pressure.

The current world crisis has raised a question mark over a great number of options that the last half of century has considered as implicit, and makes us reflect on the extent to which our own choices have contributed somehow to the aggravation or even to the beginning of the global crisis. If we agree on the fact that, beyond the rotten credits, the balloons of imaginary money, and the artificially raised shares on the stock market and all the speculative ways that led to the current fall, can be perceived the common denominator – a serious value crisis, I believe that our responsibility in this crisis, as university professors, managers of university institutions, and intellectuals, is undeniable. During the last decades, we have all contributed, even if through resignation, to a vast massification process of the educational system, more and more dominated by the economic obsession of the fast profit, and less and less preoccupied by the formative value of the disinterested knowledge. We have accepted that we can build a knowledge-based society almost completely lacking in philosophic contemplation, in fundamental theoretical knowledge, in an interest for archaeology and for the history of concepts and values of our contemporary societies. We have accepted, on behalf of an illusory practical efficiency, the dehumanization of the research approach, a damaging subordination of the asymptotic search for the Truth in the benefit of the mass production of looking for convenient truths. Just like corruptible bankers and investment funds administrators, we have sold illusions, too. It is, I believe, the moment to reconsider the academic education passing over the narrow touch of the present thinking and the mechanics of a fast gaining profit for the benefit of a new hierarchy of values and of a true knowledge-based society.

I believe that globalization should not be considered only an egalitarian force in the negative meaning, as it is very often perceived nowadays. The technological imperialism, the promotion of the consumption culture or the English language supremacy to the detriment of cultural diversity and natural identities, are realities that generate, for good reasons, opposite reactions. However, there is here a positive meaning, too: equal opportunities are available for the anyone of the young generation. Globalization has opened a borders-free market in the educational system. Meanwhile, globalization offered a communication infrastructure beyond space or time. In order to place a value to this opening, it is necessary to move on from reforming the institutions to redefining them. The educational exchange process in Europe can be compared with a tree. If mobility were to be the tree top, the roots - a network of domestic and international institutions, then the tree trunk must be made up of a new informational strategic organization that would bring profit from the critical mass of fundamental knowledge.

The double propeller of education and work presented by Mircea Malița and Orio Giarini in the Club of Rome 2003 Report, can be functional only if it follows two principles: a lifelong education, and a multi-disciplinary profile. Lifelong education has been officially implemented in Europe at the same time with starting to implement the license-master's-doctoral studies in Europe, including in the new member states from the Central and South Eastern Europe. The multi-disciplinary profile has not yet escaped the tyranny of disciplines and of the research institutes caste mentality. A solution for surpassing this situation would consist of an offer to be addressed to the young

generation, by which we do not choose the name of the disciplines, but instead those of the professions, and present them as a horizon of the professions, where disciplines are replaced by modules that allow a personal study itinerary able to make up personalized curricula. Professors should become more than prestigious entities of the research world, that teach courses and give grades. They should rather become tutors and models, reviving the old European tradition of school founding fathers. It is necessary for us to create, both in the educational system as well as in research, new playgrounds and new games amidst which university presidents have the ability to manage inter-actions. The organizational background should also change within the context where the fight for talent becomes global, and jobs are accessible through the Internet. Managing talent becomes more an art rather than a profession.

The challenges of technological development place an enormous pressure upon human resources. It is perhaps correct to state that to form and develop human resources should be considered as one of the essential concerns for humanity, as there is no technology able to produce the men and women that use it.

First, it is necessary for us to persuade the political decision makers about an obvious and often neglected, fact: the **social cost of education system shortcomings is by far bigger than the costs involved in the educational system**. The globalization of educational problems involve: a scientific or technological transfer that cannot be made without a transfer of the necessary skills to use it and without a system of values that would lead to its good use.

Second, the gaps between richness and technologies are not coextensive to the gaps between human richness. The situation of the Central and South Eastern Europe countries proves clearly that, in spite of the local delays that have taken place during the last half of century, they have still kept the formation networks that have allowed for the survival of an intellectual and cultural potential, not connected to their economic resources, seriously hit by aberrant politics, a potential offering the right field for their fast development.

A world without frontiers in education involves, as I have already mentioned, to redefine institutions. We need to educate graduates with global competencies, but able to act according to the religious, technological and cultural local environment. We should not forget that the origins of globalization are constituted by the problems encountered. Global problems, often diseases, require global answers. The slogan: **globally versus locally** is not a geographic definition, but an argument and a way of action adapted to local issues, but with a global impact. Globalization in association with democratization can no longer be perceived as an exclusively western product. Modern technology is indeed a product and a consequence of the scientific production being concentrated in the most developed countries. Globalization, perceived as an answer to the global problems, urges western technology to consider the local characteristics while it searches for global solutions. In order to build a new concept of global solidarity in the higher education field we must look at it not only from a technological perspective but also from an anthropological one. Only by following this path will we be able to reach the globalization ethos.

The diversity characterising the World Academy of Art and Science, as well as the potential it can involve, put it in the position of being capable to answer this great challenge of our time. In order for higher education to meet the big challenges that the 21<sup>st</sup> century raises the democratic societies, we need not only good managers of the present education system, but also leaders able to change the present education system. But even more is needed. Confronted with the present financial and economic crisis, economists and politicians are looking for solutions that would ensure the survival of the present political and economical system. The world financial crisis represents a historical opportunity for a new political project that would reorganize the global contemporary society. It is the right moment for the representatives of the academic environment, not constrained by the

pressures of the profit-driven business world or unlike the politicians that need to gain popular votes, to build a new cultural project that will answer the 21<sup>st</sup> century uncertainties. The essential difference between political systems, today lies in how uncertainty is managed. They can assume it by trying to find solutions through a dialogue, or can try to eliminate it through an ideological, religious, or financial dictate. Managing uncertainty can be realized only in an open society. Facing the big crises could bring about a behaviour that responds to the challenges of the reality with the respect of principles. When we cannot act motivated by the certainty of success, we can act from the conscience of duty. This concept corresponds to what politics should be in a knowledge-based society and in the global future world: a complex vision of the future, based on a new dialogue about human values.

*Gnothi seauton*, *know yourself*, is one of the precepts decreed by Socrates in Athens two millennia ago. The present world crisis brutally commands us to choose between **to have** or **to be**. A higher education for a democratic 21<sup>st</sup> century society may create a new balance between power and knowledge that would reshape a framework inside which each individual can *be* as well as *become*.