Professors or Professionals?

Contribution by Herman De Dijn (em prof KU Leuven) tot the Ethical Forum 2013 of the University Foundation

What angers me and many colleagues since a long time is how little the views of professors on their situation and their tasks is taken seriously by management and politics. I could of course give the recent example of the English examination forced indiscriminately upon everyone teaching subjects in English by the tough guys and iron ladies politicians. But let me take a more important example. The fanatical endeavor to set up a unified bibliometric system for measurement and evaluation of research output also in areas like the Humanities (Geisteswissenschaften); supposedly only for the comparison of groups or institutions, but of course inevitably having repercussions also in the evaluation of individual research. Although time and again it turned out that it is practically impossible to devise a more or less unified system (even within a single domain such as philosophy), the plans could not be stopped. Lots of serious studies appeared, on the basis of research and brainstorming by top scholars in the Humanities and the Social Sciences explaining why a unified bibliometric system is practically impossible and what is to be expected as obnoxious side effects. All to no avail. Politicians and research managers of course do not have the time nor the desire to read studies like these, but, what is worse, they cannot be shaken in their belief that their view is the only way to salvation.

Anger is not a nice emotion and when it persists it makes life miserable. Better it is to follow Spinoza's advice: *non flere, non ridere, sed intelligere* (no complaining, no ridiculing, but understanding human affairs). So, let's try, with the aid of insights from human and social scientists, to understand our situation. Will this be sufficient to change things? I doubt it. But, as Spinoza again would say, this doesn't diminish the joy of understanding. It may even help to see which courses of action are any promising at all. First some striking facts. The difficulties university professors, at least in what is called research universities, are encountering seem to be similar in different countries. Everywhere the same sort of evolution is happening, be it sooner or later, in a more or less pervasive way. Analogous difficulties are observed in other non-profit institutions like hospitals, with medical staff complaining about the intrusion of management and of what is called 'market thinking' in the organization of care (the same in domains like public service broadcasting, culture and the arts, etc.). These

facts already suggest that the unease of professors is related to other, deeper factors than the narrow-mindedness of politicians and university managers, or the attempt of industry and commerce to use universities for their own purposes. What is happening is not unrelated to the general evolution of mentalities and practices in what is called late modern society. If our analysis is valid and if the late modern framework doesn't implode soon, the malaise of professors is there to stay; unless of course, as some contend, they are a dying breed and their problems will disappear with them.

Let's sketch a first approach to the issue at hand. What is happening with academic jobs and institutions is part of what has happened with practically all jobs and institutions. A simple way to describe this process is to understand the fundamental change from workmanship to professionalism, and from institution to organization. Work- or craftsmanship (in Dutch 'arbeid door beroepskrachten') was characterized by a vocation ('beroep') and by loyalty to the setting in which one worked. This setting always somehow had the character of an institution (this was true even for firms): something instituted in the past with a specific higher purpose important for and within a specific societal context; a heritage to which those operating within it should be loyal, should make sure that it is preserved for the future. What makes people in institutions 'tick' is the pride they take in their work with its specific purpose (liberal learning, human care, objective information for the general public, etc.), responsibility towards the cause or ideal they are serving, loyalty to the institution they grew up in or belong to, collegiality with fellow craftsmen. In combination with what is commonly called individualism, the late modern attempt to master and manage work and institutions so that they yield more productivity has led to the creation of professionals, organizations and clients. A professional is someone who acquired a number of skills, today significantly termed 'competences', which can be flexibly set to work in different contexts, in order to successfully manage one's career. An organization is a complex mechanism producing a certain output for clients with as little cost and as much profit as possible. Its management and employees, who are always perfectly replaceable, use all technical, scientific and organizational knowhow available. Reference to the institutions organizations derive from is nonsensical (except when this is interesting from the point of view of image building). What makes professionals in organizations tick, is the career-possibilities offered and of course the pressure of management through all sorts of devices. What makes managers tick is the rewards and bonuses, but also the success their organization has in the market they operate in, and the desire – last but not least - to belong to the inner circles of power and/or glamour. It is

assumed that the existence of a market even for non-profit organizations is the only way to keep them performing well. This explains the effort of governments, whether socialist or liberal, to create markets for care and education (in Dutch 'zorgmarkt' and 'onderwijsmarkt'); it explains why competitions exist among universities requiring 'objective' methods of comparison and measurement of success.

In his book *The Last Professors* (Fordham UP, 2008), Frank Donoghue uses the term 'industry logic' to describe what is operating behind our backs. This term does not primarily refer to the hold of industry and commerce on universities and research; what it refers to is the dominance of an ethic of productivity, of entrepreneurial rationality, and of business standards of organization requiring measurable efficiency. Industry logic assumes that success is that only which can be measured by growth and increase of productivity (output of diploma's, publications, doctorates, projects, spin offs, etc.). Another important element in industry logic is the belief that the fuel that makes organizations function is competition; that's why a kind of 'market' is organized in which institutions have to compete with each other (usually for the same or a shrinking overall amount of money).

When this ethic and this attempt at mastery of social processes like education, research (but also medical care, etc.) is pervasive, perverse effects can be predicted and do in fact seem to follow. The most fundamental effect is the following: the internal aims of these processes (real insight or understanding and the love of it; new knowledge and the sharing of it with others so as to make new insight possible; etc.) become secondary. They are replaced by surrogate aims, *i.e.,* measurable targets which can be assessed 'objectively', such as: being more productive than others; being more in the public eye than others; having more approved projects and doctoral students than others; etc. This situation is often described by insiders as "the topsy-turvy world" (in Dutch: "de wereld op zijn kop"): research in view of (amount of) publications, instead of publication in view of the furthering of science; education in view of success instead of success as a by-product of real education; developing projects in view of one's standing as a researcher or in view of raising the amount of contract funding for one's university ('derde en vierde geldstroom') instead of research aimed at and open for real innovation; etc. A second consequence of the application of industry logic to these fields: it invariably produces deeply irritating side-effects such as extensive bureaucracies and overregulation, the ever growing expansion of what before where only sustaining services (for evaluation, control, ICT, PR, etc.) and the disciplining of those sections concerned with the 'essential' tasks. A third feature is the obsession with image and appearance: what seems to

be most important is not the quality in itself of what one is doing or producing, but the way it is perceived. It is striking how university management is continually obsessed with image and perception. The importance of image or perception in the competition between professionals as well as organizations produces conformity instead of innovation. This is what happens if one is no longer interested in the thing itself, but in the effect one obtains through it in the eyes of observers (who often do not really understand what is going on in the field).

Of course, the old 'institutional' system had its own difficulties and undesirable consequences: paternalism, nepotism, sclerosis, etc. That this was so, is no sufficient reason to be complacent about the present system. The perverse side-effects mentioned, the malaise of so many professionals, the rocketing cost of control- and management mechanisms, of image building, etc., indicate that something is deeply wrong. Even though many insiders (now including even rectors and vice-chancellors of universities) are convinced that drastic change is needed, that especially in domains like education 'industry logic' paradoxically leads to ever more bureaucracy, conformity, loss of talent, etc., it seems extremely hard to realize this change. Undoubtedly this has to do with the fact that universities and university education and research are, as we have seen, part of a wider reality and influenced by a broader mentality – a mentality consisting in an almost religious belief in mastery, control and competition. Underneath this mentality lies the fear that if one would give up disciplining, regulating, controlling, this would be disastrous for 'productivity' and would even lead to chaos. Better it is then to stick to the motions and rituals of the system; as Spinoza knew, this is what fear always leads to, to a magical attitude towards reality. No correction is to be expected from the side of politics, because politics too is in the grips of the same mentality and even strenghtens the tendencies related to it. (Louis Tobback, mayor of the fourth city in Flanders, recently was heard complaining that Flemish government regulations made it impossible for him to remove a bus stop shelter from the corner of one street to the next one.)

If our analysis of our situation is adequate, we can draw some consequences for those like me and I hope many of us feeling an inner obligation to resist the present tendencies. The first is that the typically Flemish mentality of outward conformity but inner resistance is not the right answer to our problems and in the end simply leads to cynicism and real conformity. The second is that making a few amendments here and there (as happens for example in the field of bibliometry) will very probably have the adverse effect of strengthening the system. If we are really serious about the purpose and quality of university education and research, our demands and targets should be the following: teachers and scientists are again taking

responsibility for the determination of their goals and of how to reach them; the subsidiarity principle is again the guiding principle in university organization; trust in those who do the real work should be restored, and the twisted competition which exists today should be ended. In the present social and political context this looks like a utopian program. Recent reactions among professors and initiatives like this Ethical Forum show perhaps we should not despair. Anyway, as Willem de Zwijger once said (pardon my French): "point n'est besoin de réussir pour persévérer".

Literature

Collini, Stefan *What Are Universities For?* London, Penguin, 2012.

De Dijn, Herman *Grensovergangen. Over geesteswetenschap, universitair beleid en samenleving*. Leuven, Peeters, 2008.

Donoghue, Frank *The Last Professors. The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities.* New York, Fordham University Press, 2008.

Radder, Hans (ed.) *The Commodification of Academic Research: Science and the Modern University*. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

Jaak Billiet, etc., *Bibliometrie in de Humane Wetenschappen* (Standpunt nr. 3). KVAB, Brussels, 2004 (see www.kvab.be)