

# The University and the knowledge society

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This work will focus on two areas. First, we will ask ourselves what the concept of the "knowledge society" means and then we will question its link to the university institution.

We will take as our point of departure a document presented to the UNESCO Executive Committee in 2002. In this document, Francisco Sagasti stated that *"the role that knowledge plays in all human activities has become strategic to the point that the concepts of development and progress must be redefined in terms of the ability to create, master, use, and transmit knowledge"* (UNESCO, 2002, p. 4.).

The knowledge society is changing the economic system. Today, essential wealth is not a material good. This fundamentally changes the basis of the traditional economy based on the scarcity of goods. Knowledge, the new good, multiplies by being shared, and increases with its distribution (Amitai Etzioni). Knowledge is now being substituted for the labour force as the primary factor of production.

Paradoxically, technological and industrial society completes its cycle by giving humans a central role, confirming Jean Bodin's well-known saying, *"Humankind is the only true source of wealth."* We are of course talking about the end of a society, of a paradigm that has been exhausted.

In fact Modernity, as the trend in thinking at the origin of technological and industrial society, can be explained summarily through two primary ideas:

1. The first idea is that we must arrive at purely intellectual knowledge, without blending in sensory knowledge, reputed to be the primary source of errors. Purely *a priori* knowledge (Immanuel Kant). Descartes' maxim, "I think therefore I am", summarizes it well.
2. The second idea can also be synthesised with a Cartesian phrase: the finality of human knowledge is to be come *masters and owners of nature*. Technology appears as the ultimate confirmation of the "truth" of science, the truth "is" the practise (Francis Bacon).

But this paradigm has been in crisis for some time. On the one hand, the idea of progress is in crisis; we doubt its validity. As proof, we only need to point to the atomic bomb, genetic modifications, or climate change. The challenge of sustainable development is doubtful. On the other hand, we are experiencing a profound crisis of scientific rationality. Thus, "alternative" explanations of reality, such as myths that had been considered as a pre-logical state of humanity, are regaining strength through the work of researchers such as Kurt Hübner and René Girard. Also, biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould have explained to us that evolution "tinkers", that the rationality of nature is not so perfect. Quantum physics arrives at disconcerting principles such as the uncertainty principle that sound the death knell

for the *mathesis universalis*.

That being the case, the problem of "survival" – hunger and war – unfortunately remains the most important problem confronting humanity today. In relation to survival, ideological questions can seem trivial. But this would be wrong: the world is especially lacking in ideas. "*Hunger is more than hunger*," Sartre has said, it is the denial of a right.

The knowledge society must reformulate the paradigm. Max Scheler has already explained the two major principles of the sociology of knowledge that can help us in this reformulation:

1. The closer knowledge is to absolute reality, the less it is susceptible to progress: spiritual values progress less than material and technological values. Regressions are possible, and each generation must conquer the level of humanity necessary for the flowering of the human person.
2. The more perfect and absolute objects are, the more we must "know them together": *informed* topics must be rooted in broad and deep historical and social contexts.

The challenge of the knowledge society is this: how to arrive at knowledge of absolute objects, of the supplement of the soul about which Henri Bergson spoke? How do we approach the essential questions of human existence: who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? It is not a matter of domesticating technology or making it inoffensive. It is a matter of rediscovering all of rationality or expanding the horizons of knowledge to move from the "how" to the "why". In the end, it is about viewing all of reality and finding a reason that actually proves reality.

We cannot give up on this task, as justice, the good, and the heart are as important realities as statistics or social structures. In this sense, it is worth the trouble to reread the words of Simone Weil, "*If force is absolutely sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal. But it is not. We know this experimentally. It is real in the human heart. The structure of the human heart is a reality among the realities of this universe, just like the path of a star... If justice cannot be erased from the human heart, it is real in this world*" (Weil, 1949, p. 306).

But by taking the knowledge society as an object, we risk forgetting the subject of this society. Society must become an instrument for humanisation, and must not transform itself into an instrument of domination. For that, we must think of it as a human right, "*inscribed on the democratic horizon*," according to Eduardo Portella, "*the knowledge society can only be a fundamental human right. Knowledge is a fundamental human right (...). Human rights, inseparable from the rights of the Other – the Other as an idea, culture, belief, colour, sex, social integration or not – can only be clear in a society where the right to knowledge is certain*" (UNESCO, 2002, p. 8).

The history of the university prefigures this "knowledge society" as a specific community of knowledge. In fact the university – "*universitas studiorum*" – was the first among them: knowledge was at its centre and its purpose was to propagate this knowledge. The University can and must play a central role, as it is through it, to a

large degree, that the knowledge society will become an instrument of humanisation and not of oppression.

In 1998, the UNESCO Conference on Higher Education summarised the functions of the university. The text offers a vision of a university able to contribute effectively to the humanisation of knowledge. It is important to note the accent placed on the ethical aspects of research and knowledge:

*"(a) preserve and develop their crucial functions, through the exercise of ethics and scientific and intellectual rigour in their various activities;*  
*(b) be able to speak out on ethical, cultural and social problems completely independently and in full awareness of their responsibilities, exercising a kind of intellectual authority that society needs to help it to reflect, understand and act;*  
*(c) enhance their critical and forward-looking functions, through continuing analysis of emerging social, economic, cultural and political trends, providing a focus for forecasting, warning and prevention;*  
*(d) exercise their intellectual capacity and their moral prestige to defend and actively disseminate universally accepted values, including peace, justice, freedom, equality and solidarity."*

But let us return to the topic of knowledge, the human person. International standards for higher education set out the legal obligations for the Governments that guide policies. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states, *"Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education"* (Article 13. Paragraph 2c).

Two points seem important to us here. First, "equal access". In fact, access to higher learning should be equally available to all. There should be no discrimination of access based on culture, religion or gender. But access cannot be universal as it is dependent upon the merits and abilities of the individual. Access must be guaranteed by all appropriate methods, and in particular by gradually making it free. Free education is not the panacea, it is simply considered as a way to guarantee equality of opportunity.

But opening up access is not enough; the system must also be diversified to increase equality of opportunity and increase knowledge centres. Therefore, the Final Communiqué from the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education stated, *"10. The knowledge society needs diversity in higher education systems, with a range of institutions having a variety of mandates and addressing different types of learners. In addition to public institutions, private higher education pursuing public objectives has an important role to play."*

By definition, a knowledge society is an open society, a society for all where the stakeholders participate in building the social system. *"How a society organises itself and how these institutions are developed and an inclusive governance architecture is constructed will likely depend upon political processes and decisions – and ultimately, upon the will of key stakeholders"* (United Nations, 2004, paragraph 20).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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