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Self-Education and University

Abstract

In an attempt to articulate the link between the “ideas” of university and self-education, the authors of this paper firstly set forth the classical understanding of education that precedes the conception of self-education. The second part deals with Nietzsche’s rigorous understanding of self-education as the most consequent and most far-reaching intervention in the concept of education so far. The third part is exploring the example of Derrida’s wavering in regard to university activity and efficacy and signals the modern “antinomies” of legitimising its status. It is concluded that not only exterior challenges, but also the paradoxical tasks a university sets for itself, appertain to the very constitution of the university model which readily relied on the tradition of self-education, and that the relation between the visions of university and self-education, is not devoid of intrinsic tensions, though it is often thought of these as mutually underpinning.

Key words

education, self-education, university, institutions, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida

Self-education is an “idea”. The same is the case with university.¹ But in their background there lies the third idea, which upholds the former two and has a higher degree of generality. This is education, or the “idea” of education; therefore we start with it. Then we present the idea of self-education and finally discuss antinomies of the modern university. In the conclusion we suggest, regarding the relation among these concepts that have developed into conceptions, not answers but rather guidelines within which cardinal and hence fertile contemplation upon the “destiny” of university might be taking place.

Classic understandings of education

According to a crude but not entirely incorrect, and at any rate usable division, we could say that during the course of history the notion of “education” has assumed three kinds of contents, or three connotative emphases. One would essentially be the classical one, which dominated until the Enlightenment: education was inseparably associated with the moulding of matter and soul through imitating selected examples. The next understanding arose with the enlighteners who in the eighteenth century made an unambiguous connection between education and the “aim-oriented upbringing”. Its purpose was

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to achieve the final pedagogic product: the autonomous and engaged citizen – provided it is allowed, for this occasion, to determine it in such terms, with all the reductions it entails.² The third concept or the third idea of education has appeared recently and suddenly. Of it, for now, this much can be said: both the element of imitation and the element of the final goal are lost on account of something else, to be discussed later on.

We will first expatiate upon the two “non-modern” models of education, still treating their difference as differences within the family, as if they had a single common axis, thread or root, which would at the same time distinguish them from the third “paradigm”. You will allow that in this context the common denominator of the two classical visions of education may be called “botanical”. Namely, the botanical metaphor of cultivation did not leave the stage in the self-reflection of education until, at best, the Nietzschean indeterministic and antiessentialistic intervention in the fabric of understanding education as the process of assuming an already determined shape – as the implementation, incubation and flowering of the given or imposed idea. He seems to be the first to deviate from the pious presumption that things determined in advance are already rooted in the human being, as a kind of possibility that should be realized, or that the norm, holding us as firmly under its wing, should pour something into him. Taking the autonomy and autotelicity of education into account rather seriously, that is education as self-legislative self-purpose, had therefore to wait the impressive as much as (due to abhorrence of uncontrolled subversion) subdued line of representing self-education, which could also sometimes turn, in its positive articulation, into an alibi for inefficacy or exhausting series of frivolous declarations.³

For whether it is the question of do-it-yourself gardening or of the planned horticulture of whole plantations, planting, transplanting, planting out, hoeing, grafting and watering remain the landmarks of any pedagogic vision – as long as there is one image of amorphousness, but always rather specifically and favourably “human” amorphousness which still should, for any reason, be shaped by any means. Namely, it usually has to take a form regarding this or that “designation”,⁴ regarding a better or golden past (pre-Enlightenment ideal) or the stake invested in the future that schools will heal all or most of social injustices and awkwardness and bring to realisation “*promesse du bonheur*” (Enlightenment credo).⁵ It seems that the ideal of universal education cannot even be thought away from it.

The Greek *paideia* has been connected to the idea of shaping or taking a shape both etymologically and meaningfully. Whether it is the question of a pot, a sculpture or a man, i.e. a child, it is always the issue of its/his “conscious building”, of skill to shape something; it is always the issue of referring to what is being shaped artistically, to what is artistically plastic, as well as to the normative picture that floats before the eyes of the one who shaped it, “the ‘idea’ or ‘typos’”.⁶ That image of ideational completeness of an object in the head of the author/master as something desirable remains both constitutive and decisive, while education is condemned to planned and systematic activity that is used to impact the “material”. The figure of such assuming of form, image, shape, aspect is inseparably merged with the practice of norming and with the tactics of regulated preparing and forming.

Such fate seems to have been sealed, as in the case of many other Greek terms, with its translation into Latin; *παιδεία* has become *cultura* or *humanitas*. Erudition and training in good conduct (*eruditio et institutio in bonas artes*), which ennoble the proud Roman civil *virtus*, replaces and assimilates

the ethnocentric and exclusive but also philosophically demanding *ἀρετή* of Greeks, equally based on “being civilised”. “Culture” now preserves, generalises and simultaneously extends up to vulgar literalness the Greek verb *plateio*, which, in truth, did sophists and Plato have in mind regarding the setting of a private or a state-owned field, which, by controlled feeding and watching over the plants, was shaping souls. And the thing has become simple and remained almost self-intelligible until the present time. As *agricultura* is the cultivation of soil, man’s education is cultivation of the soul, *cultura animi*. According to the agricultural analogy, nursing or cultivation – humanises.

Pedagogic agriculturalism, seemingly paradoxically, uses the naturalistic discourse to legitimise the unnatural masterly anthropomachy and boundless educational optimism. There is no doubt that, just as a skilful farmer will manage to handle and cultivate a plant “culture” in any conditions given by nature, a skilful educator will be able to “ennoble” each individual human nature. Favouring the role of educator, in his essay *On the Education of Children* Plutarch sets forth his well-known “pedagogic trinity” – nature (*physis*), the foundation as a must to begin with, learning (*mathesis*), both as teaching (*didaskalia*) and practising (*askesis*) and, eventually, a habit – and thus in-

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For further information on pre-modern notions of education, see: Rudolf Vierhaus, “Bildung”, in: Otto Brunner, Werner Conze & Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Bd. 1, KlettCotta, Stuttgart 1972, pp. 509–512; Reinhart Koselleck, “On the Anthropological and Semantic Structure of Bildung”, in: Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, pp. 170–207.

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For details on the honourable part of this array – within which the names of Nietzsche, Dilthey, Gadamer, Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze, etc. emerge, see Aleksandar Dobrijević, “Između obrazovanja i samoobrazovanja. Od *Bildung* do etike vrline”, *Filozofija i društvo* 29 (1/2006), pp. 119–127. For an account on perils that may be posed at nation’s “mentality” by immoderate affirmation of self-education, see Helmut Plessner, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*, Humanity Books, New York 1999, pp. 57–58.

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Here we have in mind the equivocal word *Bestimmung*. See Immanuel Kant, *Pädagogik*, Kants gesammelten Schriften, Bd. IX, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin 1963, p. 441; cf. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Kants gesammelten Schriften, Bd. VII, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin 1963, pp. 119–121.

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For the sake of both justice and instruction, we should say that the point in question is exclusively about popular reception of Enlight-

enment and “educational system”, and that the leading philosophers of the Enlightenment were noticeably educated elitists, aristocrats or exclusionists and, certainly, sceptics about the possibility of mass Enlightenment of people, trusting perhaps only in the education “from above”, through the despots who had already been enlightened. Cf. Paul Henri Thierry Holbach, *The System of Nature*, vol. II, The Echo Library, Middlesex (UK) 2006, pp. 115, 207; Jean Le Rond D’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, p. 103; Julien O. De La Mettrie, *Man a Machine: And, Man a Plant*, Hackett Pub. Co., Indianapolis 1994, p. 27; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation (vol 1). The Rise of Modern Paganism*, W. W. Norton and Co, New York 1966, p. 20; Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, Kants gesammelten Schriften, Bd. VII, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin 1963, p. 92; Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?”, Kants gesammelten Schriften, Kleine Schriften, Bd. VIII, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin 1963, p. 40; T. J. Reed, “Talking to Tyrants: Dialogues with Power in eighteenth-century Germany”, *Historical Journal* 33 (1990), pp. 63–79; Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment. Attitudes toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-century France*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981; Derek Beales, *Enlightenment and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, I. B. Taurus, London–New York 2005, pp. 21–23.

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Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, Volume I, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1946, p. xxiii.

stalls, in the most direct and far-reaching way and for any future pedagogy, this agricultural metaphor containing or being reduced to, by its character, the entire educational activity. Human nature is said to be acting in the same way as the non-human. Just as successful farming needs, first of all, good soil, then a skilful farmer and eventually good seeds, it is the same with education: the soil is human nature, the farmer is the educator and seeds are the learning and the regulations being transferred by spoken words. It is not coincidental that Plutarch's essay has been reprinted and quoted repeatedly since the Renaissance.

His principles and limiters are indefatigably repeated by the Western educational engineering, whose projections in this regard show surprisingly slight differences. Being "instaurating" or "restoring", reforming or revolutionary, the prescriptivism of systematic planners of mass education has repeated the very same horticultural Draft for millennia, adding only some new piquancy. Solicitous management of this or that politeia is in the possession of the visionary knowledge of the seeds of "humanity" and unmistakably attends to the unique educational and life goals of those it guides: to become a good man or even a man at all – which has been, once and for all, established to be achieved through the institute of coercive education in a well-organized school, in which allocated virtues would be taught.⁷

The change that remains determining even for the meaning attributed to it nowadays, however, begins with the German understanding of "education" in the late eighteenth century and afterwards. In a new perspective, its sense was shifted or dislocated and deviated in at least one dimension from the pedagogic vision that the enlighteners had in mind. At the turn of the century *Bildung* became, first of all, "self-cultivation", "self-education", "education of oneself" (*Selbstbildung*, *éducation de soi-même*).⁸ This semantic turning point now brings the notion close to an open-ended process and to a kind of growth and development, not limited in advance and insofar indefinite (although, admittedly, not yet totally unguided in its main direction), whether it is the question of an individual, a people or, later, nation.⁹ From that moment on, the understanding of education primarily as self-education dominated, at least declaratively, perhaps until the latest (Bologna) times and – in spite of various contextualisations, as the common denominator used by Herder, Humboldt and Goethe, Arnold and Mann – served as the basis for the educational philosophy of the university in Germany and in the West as well. The period between 1808 and 1810 may be considered as the Crucial Age for its establishing, when the model of the Berlin University propounded by Wilhelm von Humboldt prevailed over the concepts Schleiermacher and Fichte had of it. But like in so many other matters, it was Nietzsche who derived such theoretical consequences from this understanding of (self-)education that remain indispensable for the present times, even if we do not accept his conclusions.

Nietzsche's vision of rigorous self-education

The essential precondition for such a turning point in the understanding of education, however, was to reveal one of its (too) intimate and (unforgivably) self-understandable connections with philosophy. Namely, philosophers used to, mostly intuitively, unbiddenly and with rather generous approval, accept the Platonistic complement of philosophy and education which David Cooper, the outstanding philosopher of education, called "a thesis of intimacy": according to Plato, each of them simply does not go without the other.¹⁰ None

but Friedrich Nietzsche dared bring into question this connection, predominant and taken for granted from the Classical Antiquity onwards, but not in order to reject it resignedly, but in order to radicalise it experimentally: philosophy may consent only to the act of becoming intimate whose efficacy would be manifested in a kind of self-education. This, let us name it, “thesis of radical intimacy” contains *in nuce* the prominent Nietzschean anti-Platonism. Namely, while the Platonistic complement of philosophy and education, for the sake of its own success, demands a certain transcendent pledge of the complement, and therefore it can be realised only by a strenuous imitation of the ideal ulterior model, the Nietzschean vision seeks such complement in the “immanence of autodidacticism” – which is another name for his theory of “rigorous self-discipline”.¹¹

In his early work Nietzsche, indeed, has not yet given up the idea of imitation, but the latter has a human, not a transcendent face.¹² Moreover, mimetic education is not a goal for its own sake. Nietzsche has precisely defined such kind of education as “liberation” (*Bildung als Befreiung*), and their bearers as educators-liberators: “[Y]our educators can be only your liberators. And that is the secret of all culture: it does not provide artificial limbs, wax noses or spectacles – that which can provide these things is, rather, only sham education. Culture is liberation, the removal of all the weeds, rubble and vermin that want to attack the tender buds of the plant...”.¹³ Consequently, even Nietzsche, he himself being “embedded” in the tradition of *paideia* and *Bildung*, does not withstand the use of botanical metaphors. Moreover, he forces them, in the same way he forces the branch of philosophical-educational thought that shows a great affinity towards aristocratism.¹⁴

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Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 644a–654b; *Republic*, 564a, 404d–412b, in: *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis-Cambridge 1997; Louis-Antoine Léon de Saint-Just, *Fragments sur les institutions républicaines*, Transcription d’un cahier manuscrit déposé à la Bibliothèque nationale, Éditions 10/18, collection Fait et cause, Paris 2003, pp. 24–26.

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See Walter Horace Bruford, *German Tradition of Self-Cultivation. Bildung from Humboldt to Thomas Mann*, Cambridge University Press, London 1975; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1985; R. Koselleck, “On the Anthropological and Semantic Structure of Bildung”, p. 198.

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For more details on these transitions, see Louis Dumont. *Homo aequalis II. L'idéologie allemande. France-Allemagne et retour*, Galimard, Paris 1991, pp. 145, 219; R. Vierhaus, “Bildung”, pp. 511–516.

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Cf. David Cooper, “Filozofija kao obrazovanje i obrazovanje kao filozofija”, *Zbornik Instituta za pedagoška istraživanja* 30 (1998), pp. 275–277. Plato, indeed, expresses it rather in negative terms: the enemy of logos (*misologos*) is at the same time the uneducated one (*amouosos*) (Plato, *Republic* 411e).

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Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 119.

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Nietzsche brings forward three images of men that should be looked up to: the men of Rousseau, Goethe and Schopenhauer. They “will no doubt long inspire mortals to a transfiguration of their own lives” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 150).

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Ibid., pp. 129–130.

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“You need to have been born for any higher world; to say it more clearly, you need to have been bred for it” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 108). This is not only the question of the aristocratic nature of Nietzsche’s educational thought. According to Cooper, aristocratism permeates and even organises Nietzsche’s entire philosophy (David Cooper, *Authenticity and Learning. Nietzsche’s Educational Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1983, p. 110). It is rather interesting that Nietzsche’s aristocratism is the most prominent precisely



“Liberation” in question should be understood as autotelic practice, literally as “self-liberation”. For the key role or task of the “educator-liberator” is to liberate the wish for “self-overcoming” (*Selbstüberwindung*) in the learner. Hence the notion of self-overcoming, as one of the pillars of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and the notion of self-liberation, may be equated. This pair of homogeneous notions should, of course, be accompanied by the notion of “self-education”. Therefore, *Bildung* as liberation, as the process of liberation, is of an almost exclusively instrumental value: it necessarily represents the means for *Bildung* as self-cultivation of selfhood, for *Selbstbildung*. In other words, self-overcoming becomes a metaphor for self-education.¹⁵

Self-overcoming is, undoubtedly, an obsessive subject for Nietzsche. His whole work testifies to this fascination, to such an extent that only in it, and nowhere else, does he recognise his own “humanity”.¹⁶ In a letter sent to Paul Rée, Nietzsche complains (or, perhaps, boasts) that Erwin Rhode calls him a “deceiver of self-overcoming”.¹⁷ At a few places Nietzsche reveals his biggest ambition, later even being revived as completely achieved – to acquire the proud title of “educator”: “I know no higher goal than to become, in some way, an ‘educator’ in the noblest sense one day... To plant, built and create! It would mean ‘to educate oneself’, would it not?”¹⁸ Recurring to the third essay of his *Untimely Meditations*, he confidently claims that “Schopenhauer as educator” does not come out, but rather his counterpoint, “Nietzsche as educator”.¹⁹

Here we can observe a kind of turning point in Nietzsche’s thought: namely, his sudden abandonment of the “educator as liberator” conception in favour of the pedagogy of self-overcoming or autodidacticism as the *only* conception worth mentioning. It seems as if “education as liberation” (mimetics) unexpectedly lost the status of necessary means or preparation for a unique goal – self-overcoming. Nietzsche even goes as far as to argue that “there are no educators” (in the sense of “liberators”): “As a thinker one should speak only of self-education”.²⁰ By all appearances, Nietzsche began to comprehend autodidacticism as a kind of education that “keeps measure in itself”.²¹ We dare say that this change in Nietzsche’s thought was conditioned by his emphasising the importance of the “biographical” in “educator as liberator”. Namely, before they became respected didacts we should look up to, educators-liberators had to work very hard on themselves, i.e. they themselves had to become autodidacts first. In order to make this intuition convincing, Nietzsche endeavoured to reinforce or verify it by an autobiographical element, as if the autobiographical were worth mentioning only as autodidactic: “*An educator educates! But first he has to educate himself!* And I write for that reason”.²² In this regard, at one point he gives himself up to dreaming of or fantasising about a “‘school of educators’ (where they educate themselves)”.²³ What was valid for self-overcoming – as a kind of Nietzsche’s self-confirming “humanity” – should now also be valid for self-education as a regulating educational task, be it just in the form of mere possibility: “[S]elf-determination and self-education could, in the freest and most far-sighted spirits, one day become universal determination with regard to all future humanity”.²⁴

Association is inevitable, and the question poses itself: how does, if at all, Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* fit into this story? Should not this figure, however obscure it is, be a bearer of the “future humanity”, even of the entire future “culture”? In a word, is the *Übermensch* an adequate replacement first for the “educator as liberator”, and then for the “educator as autodidact”? Or is he both at the same time? Nietzsche himself does not provide an unequivocal answer, and this, surely, gives rise to various interpretations. According to an

influential reading, *Übermensch* cannot be separated from the conception of self-overcoming.²⁵ A man who has overcome himself is here being interpreted as a realisation of *Übermensch*, as someone who manages to overcome the unfavourable conditions standing in the way of realising his own unique individuality. Having in mind, then, what has been said so far, the figure of *Übermensch* completely matches the figure of the “educator” in its broadest sense, so that it can even be taken as a metaphor for the education process itself.²⁶

A support for this view may indeed be found in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. None of his other writings contains so strongly impregnated deontic demands: a man is something that *must* and at the same time *should* be overcome.²⁷ However, this particular normative tone indicates the dimension of Nietzsche’s intention which could easily be neglected. Namely, for the first time self-

at points where he uses botanical metaphors: “But the essential feature of a good, healthy aristocracy is that it does *not* feel that it is a function (whether of the kingdom or of the community) but instead feels itself to be the *meaning* and highest justification (of the kingdom or community), – and, consequently, that it accepts in good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools, all *for the sake of the aristocracy*. Its fundamental belief must always be that society *cannot* exist for the sake of society, but only as the substructure and framework for raising an exceptional type of being up to its higher duty and to a higher state of *being*. In the same way, the sun-seeking, Javanese climbing plant called the *sipo matador* will wrap its arms around an oak tree so often and for such a long time that finally, high above the oak, although still supported by it, the plant will be able to unfold its highest crown of foliage and show its happiness in the full, clear light.” (F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 259). And we shall put aside Nietzsche’s “fundamental flaw”, since *sipo matador* does not grow in Java at all, but in the Amazonian rainforests and since it is not a climbing plant but a monstrous liana.

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See Peter Fitzsimons, *Nietzsche, Ethics and Education. An Account of Difference*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam-Taipei 2007, p. 161.

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“My humanity is a constant self-overcoming” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, p. 83). And further: “My writings speak *only* of my overcomings” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 209).

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Friedrich Nietzsche, *Izabrana pisma*, Prosveta, Beograd 1996, p. 139. In a letter sent to Franz Overbeck there is an additional confirmation of this “deceiving”: “[I] strain all threads of my self-overcoming” (ibid., p. 144).

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Ibid., pp. 47–48.

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F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, p. 115.

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F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 374.

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Predrag Krstić, “Filozofska obrazovanost kao disfunkcija društva”, *Theoria* 51 (1/2008), p. 106.

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“*Erzieher erziehn! Aber die ersten müssen sich selbsterziehn!* Und für diese schreibe ich” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, vol. 8, Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari (eds.), Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München-Berlin-New York 1980, pp. 47 (2[25])).

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F. Nietzsche, *Izabrana pisma*, p. 66.

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F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 268.

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Cf. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton–New Jersey 1974, p. 309.

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See Peter Fitzsimons, “Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as a Metaphor for Education”, *Paideusis: Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society* 16 (1/2007), p. 13.

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F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 5, 18, 25, 41.

overcoming seems here to be comprehended as a means, and not as an end in itself any more. In other words, the conception of self-overcoming and the conception of *Übermensch* cannot be equated. A man should and must overcome himself only in the direction of what is “higher” than a man, whatever it is, i.e. towards something no longer being a man. Therefore “educator” cannot be the same as *Übermensch*. At best, he is nothing but a preparation for something that has not yet come into existence and for what it is not known if it ever will. Such reading gives the right to those interpretations that recognise a “negative pedagogy” in *Zarathustra*, teaching without a moral, a teacher without students and without inclination to have them.²⁸

If *Übermensch* is the final word of Nietzsche’s “teleology”, we can therefore conclude that he renounces, in a way, his earlier drafts of a philosophy of self-education or rather, he overcomes them successively: self-education gradually and almost imperceptibly transforms from a sublime goal into a means for some further, possibly unattainable goal. On the other hand, if *Übermensch* does not have anyone to look up to but himself, he is an autodidact *par excellence*. Nevertheless, a synoptic view on Nietzsche’s oeuvre reveals his persistent critique (clearly adduced in the early writing *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*) of as yet predominant view of education/culture as a function of social usefulness (creating “educational philistines” as replaceable cogs in a creaky social mechanism), which is always to the detriment of the independent status of culture as regards the wellbeing of the state. Autodidacticism would, in that sense, denote not just a protest against the relentless utilitarianisation of the university apparatus, but a recommendation or a guideline for anti-banalisation of the very idea of education.

Derrida and the aporias of the university

The autodidactic moment of self-education and its real or imaginary sanctuary in the Berlin university model, in the face of the challenges of its corruption in the twentieth century, will be used more or less openly as a reference point by thinkers so different from each other as Jaspers and Habermas or Derrida. In one case, it was in conjunction with comprehensive nationification, with the branding one’s production on the basis of geographical origin; then, it was sufficient to insist on the “reality of the free spirit”, on the mediaeval transnational tradition and on the state’s obligation to respect it, at the same time funding the free spirit without asking why and what for, as a kind of inalienable and guaranteed right.²⁹ In another case, the reference will be used as against the threat of losing one’s own research substance and yielding to perhaps even more perfidious powers and tyrants. For, the contemporary crisis of the university, that is, of its philosophy of education, at first glance perhaps again paradoxically, is mostly (ante)dated back to the 1970s. It was in this period that it was observed that the university inevitably follows the very logic of growing transnationalisation, which in the end erodes precisely the nation-state upon which its model had been designed.³⁰ Or, to put it in more theoretical terms: it became questionable if its idea – with its inevitable fundamental figure, the figure of “constitution of selfhood through enquiring into non-selfhood”, “forming the selfhood through the temptation of otherness”³¹ – may still rest on the philosophy of classical German idealism?³²

Jacques Derrida’s musings on these issues seem to be both pertinent and inspiring. In spring 1999 and on 30 June 2000 in Athens and at the University of Frankfurt respectively, he gave lectures devoted to the “unconditional” character of the university and its future. By university “without conditions” Derrida means the modern European university – built more or less according

to the Berlin nineteenth-century model – which has been on the stage for two centuries already and which is recognised within frames of “what is called academic freedom, an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by researching, knowing, and thinking the *truth*”.³³ So, in it everything is exposed to unconditional endeavours of a thought unbounded disciplinarily, philosophically, or scientifically, which is not even reducible to critique. “There is, in principle, no limit, in the university, in the critical – or, I prefer to say, deconstructive – examination of every presupposition, every norm, every axiomatics...”³⁴ In Derrida’s work, however, the unconditionality of the university seems to be less factual than normative. The university, it is said, is yet to become the ultimate site of critical – and more than critical – resistance to any dogmatic and unjust appropriation.

The phrase “more than critical” testifies to the new challenges and a certain awareness that the university itself is not innocent, is even not necessarily a victim as regards the crisis of its own idea, legitimation and status. More than critical, Derrida explains, means “deconstructive”, means “the right to deconstruction as an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only about the history of the concept of a man, but about the history of the very notion of critique, about the form and the authority of the question, about the interrogative form of thought”.³⁵ It is for this excess that Derrida seems to care the most; for an extremely consistent implementation, for applying the principle to himself, for not stopping, for not settling, or sedimenting even in resistance.³⁶ In other

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Cf. P. Krstić, “Filozofska obrazovanost kao disfunkcija društva”, p. 107 and Eliyahu Rosenow, “What Is Free Education? The Educational Significance of Nietzsche’s Thought”, *Educational Theory* 23 (4/1973), pp. 354–370.

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See Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University*, Beacon Press, Boston 1959; Karl Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography”, in: Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Tudor Publishing Company, New York 1957, pp. 35, 45–53.

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For this kind of reconstruction, see Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1996.

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Antoine Berman, *L’Épreuve de l’étranger. Culture et tradition dans l’Allemagne romantique*, Gallimard, Paris 1984, pp. 68, 75; Craig Ireland, *Subaltern Appeal to Experience. Self-Identity, Late Modernity, and the Politics of Immediacy*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2004, p. 63.

32

Jürgen Habermas, “The Idea of the University. Learning Processes”, *Belgrade Circle Journal* 1–2/1998 (Special Issue: In Defence of the University), pp. 29–38; cf. Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schel-

ling, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ideja univerziteta*, Branko Despot (ed.), Globus, Zagreb 1991.

33

Jacques Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (Thanks to the ‘Humanities,’ What *could take place* Tomorrow)”, in: Tom Cohen (ed.), *Jacques Derrida and The Humanities. A Critical Reader*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 24; cf. Jacques Derrida, “Unconditionality or Sovereignty. The University at the Frontiers of Europe”, *Oxford Literary Review* 31 (2/2009), pp. 120; see also, Jacques Derrida, “Les pupilles de l’Université. Le principe de raison et l’idée de l’Université”, *Belgrade Circle Journal* 1–2/1998 (Special Issue: In Defence of the University), pp. 17–28.

34

J. Derrida, “Unconditionality or Sovereignty”, p. 123.

35

J. Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition”, p. 26.

36

Which may also, as we know from Koselleck at least (cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988), provide mental comfort and moral conveniences.

words, for what can be read as a warning that the university, insofar as it is possible, should not be doing what it has done, perhaps inevitably, from the beginning: recycle the logic of domination or, to use here Derrida's term for the same process of detrimental subjectivisation, "sovereignty". It seems that the deconstructive dismantling is the only one to guarantee the university's right to specific and honour(able)ed existence, just as only critical and more than critical questioning – questioning also one's own critical questionings as non-questioned axiomatics, questioning the traditional figure of theoretical criticism and password of contemplation as the authority of the question form, questioning thought as "questioning" – enables and establishes as a principle what is possible only in performance, in a performative manner, by creating events: the university's right to deconstruction and unconditional resistance.

Derrida believes that such unconditional resistance enables the opposing of a "universal university" to all external powers, including those most expansive in modernity: powers of the (nation) state, the (corporate) economy and the (mass) media, as well as the powers of ideology, faith and culture that are still in good health. However, that impossible unconditionality of university, its abstract and hyperbolic invincibility, is also recognised as its weakness and vulnerability. It is also powerless at the same time, without its own powers before quotidian ones – "[b]ecause it is a stranger to power, because it is heterogeneous to the principle of power". It is, therefore, "without condition", both in the sense that it is "unconditional" and in the sense of "powerlessness", "lack of defence". Being absolutely independent, it is also "an exposed, tendered citadel, to be taken, often destined to capitulate without condition, to surrender unconditionally".³⁷ Consequently, being faced with modern techno-scientific seductions and enticements, the university needs not only the resistance principle, but also the strength of resistance – and of defection: "deconstruction (and I am not at all embarrassed to say so and even to claim) has its privileged place in the university and in the Humanities as the place of irredentist resistance or even, analogically, as a sort of principle of civil disobedience, even of dissidence in the name of a superior law and a justice of thought".³⁸ In the name of freedom, namely, the unconditional thought of the university should question the principle of power as the principle of sovereignty and – finding its space of freedom – remain itself without power: "It is an unconditionality without sovereignty, which is to say at bottom a freedom without power. But without power does not mean 'without force'".³⁹

Derrida's "principle of resistance and dissidence" outlines a perspective on the university that endeavours to reconcile without casualties and loss of productive tensions, or at any rate to bring to awareness, the paradoxical alternative of its own positioning, which we aspired to illustrate in this paper: "*without power but without weakness. Without power but not without force, be it a certain force of weakness*".⁴⁰ Like "justice" and "messiahship" in (later) Derrida work – more precisely, "messiahship without messianism", "waiting without expectation", which is the "universal structure of experience", the "universal structure of relation to an event"⁴¹ – the university could thus become a re-valued and reshaped "institution" at which, but not within which, the work of deconstruction ceases and which makes the room for (practical) opportunities. Inspired by Levinas's strength of the powerless, this deteleologised messiahship now accepts, by promoting otherness, that the future is always unexpected, unforeseeable and unprogrammed, and by promoting justice it posits the future into the present time and imposes responsibility to act without delay.⁴²

This perspective does not seem worse – only less comfortable and more precarious – than the phantasm into which the university has been caught. How-

ever, it seems that a more serious trouble arises from the fact that its obligation of, after all, always potentially self-devouring deconstruction cannot be prescribed, somewhat like the civil disobedience referred to by Derrida, as well as the right to rebellion in the Constitution. This perspective, however, clearly signals that no agreeable support in the eternal enemy outside can be found anymore, that the problem is inside, and that the alternative within which university is stretched can easily be both his place of birth and of death.

In these terms here it seems more interesting to question the very agreement between the understanding of self-education and the idea of university. Could university have ever been a refuge of non-directive education? How has, or how could have, an institution so, after all, self-understandably standardising and rather hierarchising, in addition inevitably imbricated in the power relations precisely by virtue of that Knowledge through the production of which it claims to be eschewing them,⁴³ survived, perhaps after the compulsory general and functional or preparatory secondary education, as an oasis of resistance? And what could the legitimation of self-education be based upon, if at all, in such an institution? In other words and rather pointedly: could it indeed, there or anywhere, be established?

It could easily turn out that the university, perhaps already in its “idea” and certainly in the implementation thereof, is subsumed under the more general paradox of all “institutions of freedom” that turn from guards into their own gravediggers. It is also the paradox of righteous brotherhood by subjugation that inevitably brings forth homogenisation before the conquerors, uniforming themselves even after the liberation: first within boundaries of the protocol of its own occurrences and then in increasingly wider scope it practises the same or, which is even worse, much subtler rule against which it was ostensibly rising against – as, for instance, capitalism with its, i.e. university’s “discourse of expertise”.⁴⁴ After all, it may turn out that what Bloch argues for Christianity is also valid for the university – that the most valuable things

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J. Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition”, p. 27–28.

38

Ibid., p. 29.

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J. Derrida, “Unconditionality or Sovereignty”, p. 129.

40

Ibid., p. 130.

41

Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons”, in: Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations. A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Specters of Marx”*, Verso, London–New York 1999, pp. 242, 248–253.

42

J. Derrida, “Marx & Sons”, p. 229.

43

Foucault is here, naturally, an inevitable association and imperishable witness. See, of course, Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, Panteon, New York 1980.

44

More(neo)psychoanalytically, (post)structuralist and politically speaking, “university discourse”, that is “biopolitics discourse” as the “discourse of expertise” moved to the side of or was taken over by the capitalistic “master discourse” (Jacques Lacan, *L’emvers de la psychanalyse, 1969–1970*, Seuil, Paris 1998; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2008): being seemingly more “humane” and “liberal”, it actually still organises and manages the lives of individuals and society in a more perfidious manner. Emerging as a true victor in the struggle against the “brutal capitalism” of radically directed “1968”, the “postmodern capitalism”, according to this interpretation, becomes able to use its own logic in order to absorb its deepest opposites and, moreover, to place them as its own products. Thus it uses the autonomy of institutionalised theoretical university knowledge and transforms it within the “society of knowledge” into capital or production capacity.

in it are the heretics. Renegades of the modern university almost at the very moment of its establishment, who are at the same time, probably not by accident, doyens of contemporary philosophy (Marx, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche before all), autodidacts whose inspirational heresies the university has managed, just as any other industry and in progressively shorter time, to absorb into its registers and to concatenate within its apparatus, could testify that the university – fortunately, necessarily, resentfully and contrary to its own efforts – engenders such gifts too. On the other hand, without its orthodoxy, they would, most likely, never have appeared.

Conclusion

Built roughly at the same time, the idea of the modern university and the idea of self-education have advanced in an apparently harmonious coalition. Sprung from the idea of resistance, resistance to anything that undermines their self-sufficiency and sublime autotelicity, they built their autonomy by relying perhaps only on non-mimetic, non-instrumental and unforeseeable ideal of “total personality”. The Berlin University model proclaimed it, and the protagonists of self-education found a fulcrum in it – but also a point of resistance at the same time.

Self-education has, in fact, a dual connotation. On one hand, its goal is the same as that of the modern university: education itself is a virtue, and the educated man, never definable in advance, is its image. On the other hand, self-education points to the autodidacticism as well, not so much to the goal, but to the method that is a necessary countermove to educational institutions, to the need for a critical reminder of the danger of any educational establishment. In the first sense, self-education and university advance together harmoniously: the resistance against the third party – national, ideological, religious, market or media interventions in research programs and knowledge – forms the point of their communality or even unity. Only the strategies may differ: organized opposition with the risk of looking like the opponent or a proud retreat devoid of opportunities for corruption, but for influence too.

In the other sense, when understood as autodidacticism, self-education and university diverge, perhaps to the detriment of both, since their relationship transforms into a more or less static opposition. The university, as a place of protection and channelling idiosyncratic intellectual exploits in front of the threat of some non-academic force that would like to functionalize them, turns from its logical chassis into a trammelling cage that disables them. In a dialectical co-directedness of free thought and its institutionalization, outwardly free university inevitably establishes rules of the game that deny its inner freedom, impose standards and urges to the enlightened apostasy – of those “free thinkers” who are, even though only in a negative posture, inevitably referred to it.

In other words, self-education and university, given the common goal – the educated individual – and the common enemy – placing education in the service of non-research purposes – advanced in parallel, both historically and ideologically. Moreover, they still advance – to the extent that (is possible that) the university remains a place of loose, nondoctrinaire and non-narcissistic fellowship. However, the separation comes into play when (and inasmuch as it is the case) university becomes a place of not only instrumentalised, but also hierarchised knowledge that repeats and/or regenerates forms of domination against which it might have risen before.

The question is whether the university can exist as an heir to the ideals of self-education and whether it can tolerate or even encourage recalcitrant and rebellious autodidacts in their midst immediately, and not only after the events as it still sometimes thinks it does, or is it sentenced to the industrialization that is not dictated by external instances alone, but also by its own institutional structure? In other words – and therefore Derrida's articulation of intrinsically antinomical situatedness of university is significant – is it possible that the university does not follow the patterns of power and not being powerless itself? Even if being impossible, it is certainly a noble mission. Or the constant struggle of power relations and the economy within its current contexts, which the university should not only testify, but also think and, loyal to its ideal even in its own questioning, practice.

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Samoobrazovanje i univerzitet

Sažetak

U nastojanju da artikuliraju vezu između »ideja« univerziteta i samoobrazovanja, autori ovog članka, kao svojevrsnu predigru, u prvom dijelu izlažu ona klasična razumijevanja obrazovanja koja prethode koncepciji samoobrazovanja. U drugome dijelu diskutira se Nietzscheovo rigorozno shvaćanje samoobrazovanja kao najkonzekventnija i najdalekosežnija intervencija u dotadašnji koncept obrazovanja. Treći dio na primjeru Derridaovih kolebanja u pogledu djelatnosti i djelotvornosti univerziteta signalizira suvremene »antinomije« legitimacije njegovog statusa. Zaključuje se da ne samo izvanjski izazovi nego i paradoksalni zadaci koje sebi postavlja spadaju u samu konstituciju onog modela univerziteta koji je rado sebe oslanjao na tradiciju samoobrazovanja, a da odnos između vizija univerziteta i samoobrazovanja, za koje se mislilo da se uzajamno podupiru, nije lišen intrinzičnih tenzija.

Ključne riječi

obrazovanje, samoobrazovanje, univerzitet, institucije, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida

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Selbstbildung und Universität

Zusammenfassung

Sich bemühend, die Verbindung zwischen der Idee der Universität und der der Selbstbildung zu artikulieren, darstellen die Verfasser dieses Textes im ersten Teil, als ein eigenartiges Vorspiel, die dem Konzept der Selbstbildung vorangehenden klassischen Bildungsverständnisse. Im zweiten Teil wird die strenge Bildungsauffassung Nietzsches als die konsequenteste und weitreichendste Intervention in den bisherigen Bildungskonzept diskutiert. Im dritten Teil des Textes werden die gegenwärtigen "Antinomien" diskutiert, die im Zusammenhang mit der Legitimierung der Lage der Universität entstanden sind, und zwar auf dem Beispiel der Schwankungen Derridas in Bezug auf die Wirkung und die Wirksamkeit der Universität. Es wird gefolgert, dass nicht nur externe Herausforderungen, sondern auch paradoxe Aufgaben, die die Universität sich selbst stellt, in die Verfassung selbst desjenigen Universitätsmodells gehören, das sich gern auf die Tradition der Selbstbildung anlehnt, und dass das Verhältnis zwischen der Universität- und Selbstbildungsvorstellungen, die als sich gegenseitig stützend angesehen waren, der intrinsischen Spannungen nicht entbehren kann.

Schlüsselwörter

Bildung, Selbstbildung, Universität, Institutionen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida

Aleksandar Dobrijević, Predrag Krstić

L'éducation par soi-même et l'université

Résumé

Se proposant d'articuler un lien entre l'« idée » d'université et celle d'éducation par soi-même, les auteurs de cet article, sous forme d'une mise en train générique, exposent dans la première partie les acceptions classiques du terme éducation antérieures à la conception de l'éducation par soi-même. Dans la deuxième partie, il est question de la manière rigoureuse de Nietzsche de comprendre l'éducation par soi-même comme l'intervention la plus conséquente et la plus porteuse dans le concept d'éducation ayant cours jusqu'alors. La troisième partie signale, partant de l'exemple des hésitations de Derrida au sujet de l'activité et de l'efficacité de l'université, des « antinomies » modernes touchant à la légitimité de son statut. La conclusion formule que non seulement des défis extérieurs mais également des tâches paradoxales qu'elle s'impose font partie de la constitution même du modèle d'université qui s'appuyait volontiers sur la tradition de l'éducation par soi-même, tandis que la relation entre la vision d'université et celle d'éducation par soi-même dont on pensait qu'elles s'étaient mutuellement, n'est pas exempte de tensions intrinsèques.

Mots-clés

éducation, éducation par soi-même, université, institutions, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida