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The German Education Crisis (1963)

Georg Picht, an educator who made a name for himself with the book *Die deutsche Bildungskatastrophe* [*The German Educational Catastrophe*], criticizes the narrow-mindedness of the traditional German academic community and argues for a reform of the university system, which, as he writes, would have to include both an overhaul of the curricula and a plan for the future.

The Tradition and Future of the University

[. . .] The reasons for the internal weakness of our institutions of higher education are not difficult to recognize. The problem already started with the First World War, a terrible bloodletting that has come to be symbolized by the name Langemarck; the younger elite of German science and scholarship was senselessly sacrificed.[1] During the Weimar period, the state, burdened by reparations and the economic crisis, did not have the financial means to initiate the college and university expansion necessitated by global developments; we are still paying for those failings. With National Socialism, catastrophe befell German institutions of higher education. By the winter semester of 1934-35, 14.8 percent of all college and university lecturers had already been dismissed. By 1938, according to an estimate from that year, one-third of all faculty members had been dismissed, transferred, or forced to retire. The regime's hostile attitude towards scholarship caused student enrollment for the winter semester of 1938-39 (55,300) to drop to about half of what it was for the winter semester of 1928-29 (111,600). This also applied to the natural sciences and technical subjects. Thus, at a time when a country's international status was becoming increasingly dependent on its scientific capabilities, German scholarship was deliberately dismantled and ideologically poisoned. Science and research, already weakened externally and ensnarled both morally and intellectually in a wretched, prolonged illness, were then subjected to the Second World War, which claimed huge numbers of new victims, destroyed irreplaceable institutes and libraries, and ended in the loss of a number of the country's most significant colleges and universities.

[1] At Langemarck in Flanders (Belgium) approximately 1,500 young German war volunteers were killed in October 1914. The battle has been interpreted as either a heroic attempt by young Germans or the senseless slaughter of innocent young people – eds.

A simple conclusion can be drawn from these facts: the older generation, which is running our institutions of higher education today, experienced such great loss through emigration and war, had its self-confidence so shattered by the experience of Nazism, and was forced to waste so much energy on tasks not related to scholarship during the war and postwar reconstruction period that it cannot be expected to rebuild the German higher education system. If we still hold out hope that German science and research will regain international prestige, then this hope lies with the younger generation. The future of German universities depends on whether the intellectually agile minds among the young faculty and the student body will recognize and accept the challenges presented to them by a new world. What do these challenges look like?

1. In all areas of public and private life, scientific research determines the world of technological civilization. It has become the basic law governing the modern world to an extent that we have yet to fully grasp. The economic and political competitiveness of a country is therefore utterly dependent on the number, and the standing, of the scientists and scholars at its disposal. Since the growing academic demands necessarily penetrate all levels of education, all the way down to elementary school, a substantial expansion of the entire education system is also necessary – for the productivity of society depends on the state of its education system. In order to meet these demands, we must be prepared for an expansion of academic institutions of higher education that goes far beyond the current plans of the Council of Science and Humanities. We have reached that hopeless position where an increase in quality can only be achieved through an increase in quantity and the drop in standards associated with it, because the numerical relationship between [the number of] qualified instructors and the size of the student body has become so absurd that quality [education] can no longer be imparted.

2. Science and scholarship still find a home in the shell of the old Humboldt University, but today little remains of the universal spirit that inaugurated this university. In fact, our universities and colleges today are an external aggregation of highly specialized institutes based on the principle of the division of labor. Their mentalities and methods exhibit an astounding similarity to those seen in the scholarship of the eighteenth century, which the philosophy of German idealism subsequently hoped to overcome through a revolution in thinking. In the same way as then – and yet in a totally new way as well – it is imperative today to recognize that the basic conceptions of the supposedly modern, specialized sciences are antiquated even from a scientific perspective. They are antiquated because they cannot do justice to the real status and actual function of science and research in the technological world. Today, the results of research in the specialized sciences are directly translated into the technological, economic, and political practices of a society that, from a structural point of view, is unable to engage objectively and critically with the implications of science and research. Therefore, the inherited tradition of mediating between theory and practice has fallen by the wayside. Theory is itself and at once the most radical practice of our time. If science is to remain science it must come to terms with this fact; that is, it must consciously make this fact a subject of scientific reflection. Theoretical deliberations on the possible consequences of science and the theory of the applicability of science necessarily become an integral part of science itself.

3. Since the practical implications of scientific research can only be grasped by the researchers themselves, scholars are forced to assume a task previously reserved for politicians. Only science can meet the needs of the modern form of politics, namely of planning – a type of planning that, if it is to make sense, must be supported by scientifically sound prognoses. Science cannot elude this responsibility, because the tools of power it conveys nowadays are so immense that the consequences would be catastrophic if they continued to be thoughtlessly surrendered to politicians, who are scientific dilettantes. Researchers can no longer clear their consciences by invoking the antiquated conception of an allegedly pure science.

4. This, however, leads once again to the opening of broad horizons, which is where the founders of Berlin University [i.e. Humboldt University] once saw the mandate of science and scholarship. For, based on what has been said up to now, it has become clear that the responsibility of science in modern society can only be fulfilled if science, in considering its possible implications, is mindful of the larger intellectual, political, and social context in which each scientific discovery finds its place. Science must make what it does the subject of scientific inquiry once again. That, however, is the classic theme of the science of sciences, namely philosophy, which, wherever it surfaced on a large scale, also understood itself as the science of politics. Therefore, this mandate ties the tradition of German universities to the future tasks of science and research.

Not only the future of our institutions of higher education, but also the future of our state and of our society, and maybe even the survival of mankind, depend on whether science succeeds in solving the problems outlined above. But, as has already been mentioned, these problems can only be solved by the younger generation. Anyone studying a science today should also be cultivating an awareness of the enormous responsibility that comes with the practice of any scientific discipline in our time. Going beyond individual scientific achievements, there must also be a general change in consciousness and a general broadening of horizons. Such a process can only get under way, however, if every individual gets involved on his own accord. Should our civilization be destroyed by a catastrophe, then blame will be found in intellectual lethargy, the blindness of specialists, and that brand of narrow-mindedness that prevents a view beyond one’s own nose. Everyone is called upon today to combat this life-threatening mentality, which is gaining ground, particularly at our institutions of higher education.

Source: Georg Picht, „Tradition und Zukunft der Universität" ["The Tradition and Future of the University"] (1963); reprinted in Irmgard Wilharm, ed., *Deutsche Geschichte 1962-1983. Dokumente in zwei Bänden* [*German History 1962-1983. Documents in Two Volumes*], vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, pp. 231-33.

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