



4. *The ‘Academic Difference’: Reimagining Academic Freedom in European Liberal Democracies*

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Abstract: Our paper aims to address the relationship between democracy and academic freedom (AF) starting from the transformations of higher education within liberal democracies, that is, within the socio-economic dynamics of late capitalism, which determine the change in the way AF has been conceived over the last thirty years. In Europe this concept was traditionally inspired by the Kantian-Humboldtian principle of the necessary distance of the university from society (‘freedom and isolation’). Yet in the new global scenario this model has increasingly been supplanted by the contrary neoliberal imperative of the ‘tuning’ between university and society. Under the justification of an alleged democratic ‘opening’ of the academy over and against an elitist ‘closure’, this principle has concealed the subjugation of the academy to the competitive market. Whereas the ‘Magna Charta Universitatum’ of 1988 still sought to maintain the modern European idea of the university while opening it up to a new horizon, the path taken by the EU has instead substantially liquidated that idea. Our proposal is to re-imagine the concept of AF in terms of ‘academic difference’, starting from a genealogical re-reading of the classical idea of ‘freedom and isolation’: a transformative, not restorative, re-reading that turns the dereferentialised condition of the contemporary university from a loss into an opportunity.

Keywords: academic freedom, democracy, late capitalism, entrepreneurial university, academic difference, genealogy

Introduction: The ‘Academic Difference’¹

It is surprising to note that – unlike ‘freedom of speech’ – there is no common definition for ‘Academic Freedom’ (AF): although a widely discussed and debated topic, it seems that there is no agreement on what AF actually means.² Yet in the plethora of policy documents and academic papers, both at a European and a global level, although most of the questions remain open, a consensus has emerged: academic freedom indeed refers to the freedom of teaching, learning and research (in content, methods and aims), and is closely connected to the equally complex issue of ‘institutional autonomy’.

These common components are the main points of reference in the debate in Europe, and in particular in the framework of the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Our analysis, however, while taking the different educational systems into account, does not focus on one specific geopolitical area, but rather on the *process* – started in Bologna in 1999 – initiated, directed and developed by the major part of EU countries.³ We shall therefore treat one cultural and political *development* – which was already anticipated by the stipulation of the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) and the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) – and show how this development has contributed to shaping the understanding of AF in the European debate, and the possible ways in which it can be reimaged.

¹ We would like to thank Helmer Stoel for his careful linguistic review of our article.

² Guy Neave, “Academic Freedom in an Age of Globalisation”, *Higher Education Policy* 15 no. 4 (2002): 331–334, 332.

³ The Bologna Process statements have been confirmed by the highest national public authorities. However, they have no legal status (participation is voluntary): they do not legally bind, but *influence* national politics, which in turn influence the development of this process. From this point of view, we can approach the Bologna Process not only as a political project that can be geographically circumscribed by EU or EHEA-countries, but also and above all as a ‘debate’ within a political and cultural project, which began in the EU, then developed in the broader EHEA, and which had global repercussions. See for example Pavel Zgaga who, in reference to the Bologna process, prefers to use the expression of the “European dimension”. Cf. *The Development of a Standard-Setting Instrument on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy: The Role of Public Authorities*, Feasibility Study for CDES, Ljubljana: Centre for Educational Policy Studies, 2010, 24.

⁴ Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000. *Presidency Conclusions*.

In the framework of this debate the co-presence, or rather the contraposition of two different specifically European traditions of AF can be recognized. On the one hand, the notion of 'freedom' today is in fact shaped by an imperative of 'openness' of the university towards society and the needs of the market, in conformity with the objective of the European Union of becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world".⁴ On the other hand, the very notion of AF has its origins in an European tradition of the university, which from the *medieval* idea of the university developed itself into the first German and then European idea of *Bildung*, in which the Kantian-Humboldtian principle of a necessary *distance* of the university from society ('freedom and isolation') became essential.⁵

In the last few years, the debate on a definition of AF has solidified the simplistic opposition between these two extremes: on the one hand a European model that demands freedom as 'openness' to the demands of society and the market, in which a critique of Humboldt can be recognized;⁶ on the other hand a defense in a Humboldtian key of the ideal of isolation ("*Einsamkeit*") in relation to those demands. Between these two extremes – that today seem to more and more acquire a mythological or ideological status – the question of 'what' AF 'is' in Europe, and of how it can be 'reimagined', not only risks becoming too biased, but also loses its critical content, becoming an abstract formula.

Going beyond this simplistic vision between 'openness' and 'closure', 'Humboldt' and 'anti-Humboldt', our contribution – that has a fundamentally philosophical character – proposes a different approach. Instead of departing from an unambiguous determination of 'what' AF 'is',⁷ and therefore looking for such a univocal and functional *definition* of AF, we propose to

⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin", in *Idee und Wirklichkeit einer Universität* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1960), 193–204.

⁶ See Johann P. Olsen, "Democratic Government, Institutional Autonomy and the Dynamics of Change", *Western European Politics* (2009): 439–465, 70.

⁷ This, however, would also presuppose a clear preliminary, more general definition of the concept of freedom itself, of which the AF would be a specification or a more limited articulation. See Terence Karran, "Academic Freedom in Europe: Time for a Magna Charta?", *Higher Education Policy* 22 (2009): 163–189, 166: "One of the major problems with academic freedom is that, as Van Alstyne (1975, 71) notes, '[a]cademic freedom is a "freedom" (i.e., a liberty marked by the absence of restraints or threats against its exercise) rather than a "right" (i.e., an enforceable claim upon the assets of others)'. Consequently, '[a]cademic freedom is most often defined by a violation or an abridgment of a particular right. In other words, academic freedom is often defined by its absence' (Tierney, 2001, 8)."

clarify ‘how’ AF – taken in its changing historical form – discloses an always problematic and conflictual dimension: *a dimension, and not a fixed property*, that can be ascribed to a subject or a category (teachers, students, academic research, education).

Therefore we will depart from a critical-genealogical rereading of the Humboldtian idea of ‘freedom and isolation’, which – as we shall see – bring us to a new understanding of this conflictual ‘dimension’ in terms of “academic difference”: a “heteropic” dimension (with Foucault) or a “force-field” (with Adorno).

Re-imagining Academic Freedom

The faculty of imagination – at least in modern philosophy since Kant – by its very nature refers to a temporal, or even historical dimension. There is often the tendency to view the imagination as something which has free reign over the future, as if it were a *tabula rasa*. Yet this idea of imagination easily falls back into being plain reproductive imagination, that is, a mere rehashing and association of already given images, without ever really creating something new. Or, to use a key expression of contemporary discourse, it is confined to the technical enclosure of ‘innovation’, and therefore incapable of any truly new invention.⁸

In our opinion, really reimagining AF today implies a *critical* reflection on the framework of almost half a century of neoliberal politics (a label that may be worn out, but that retains its heuristic productivity). We understand ‘critique’ here in terms of a rigorous genealogical praxis which – following Foucault’s reading of Kant – always implies a historical praxis of emancipation: an “(an)archeology” against any principle of authority, that puts the present under discussion, and in this way engages in an exercise of freedom – something which in fact lies at the very heart of the genealogical approach.⁹

⁸ On innovation-focused knowledge policies and their limits, see Jean-Paul Malrieu, *La science gouvernée, essai sur le triangle sciences, techniques, pouvoir* (Toulouse: Ombre Blanches, 2011); Henry Etzkowitz, Loet Leydesdorff, “The Dynamics of Innovations: From National Innovation Systems and ‘Mode 2’ to a Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations”, *Research Policy* 29 (2000): 109–123.

⁹ Cf. Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que la critique? Critique et Aufklärung”, *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* LXXXIV, 2 (1990): 35–63; Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” in *Dits et Ecrits*, vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 562–578. For the concept of (an)archeology cf. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants* (Paris: eHeSS-Gallimard-Seuil, 2012), 76–77.

Just as the imagination is commonly associated with the future, the historical-genealogical gaze is understood as directed towards the past, even as a 'genetic' return to the origins. In reality, however, a truly genealogical method is neither animated by a nostalgic conjuring of origins, nor does it even cherish any particular regard for the past. On the contrary, in a first instance it discloses the present as 'becoming', as something that could have been but also could not have been, and that, as such, is not destined to remain the same or to progress.¹⁰ In other words, for the genealogical gaze the present is never an unchangeable reality. Stability, the roots and foundation of something is, as Foucault puts it, "never such that we cannot in one way or another envisage, if not its disappearance then at least identifying by what and from what its disappearance is possible."¹¹

What is even more: as a 'differential' of 'descent', the genealogical imagination¹² also remounts to all that has not been, to the unexpressed potentialities, to the reservoirs of the future – in term of the virtuality of action – that the past hold in its folds. There is, as Ernst Bloch once remarked, "an as yet unexhausted surplus of future in the past".¹³ In the same way, the genealogical approach has as its authentic core an imagination productively oriented towards the future, towards 'the new' in a privileged sense, because it is inventively directed towards the past. Genealogy, in this sense, has no restorative will, but rather "reveals an ontological and ethical exercise of freedom".¹⁴

Although the imaginative core of genealogy emerges quite clearly in artistic and philosophical practices, it is less clear in political praxis. And yet, if imagining something does not imply a *creatio ex nihilo*, or on the contrary, a simple progression of or a variation on the present, then looking towards the past to reimagine AF does not mean antiquarian reconstruction, but already contains within itself a political-genealogical exercise of the imagination, or more precisely, of an exercise of re-imagination. It is an exercise that is – at least regulatively – endowed with a critical potential necessity to not to get trapped into a pacifying vision of transformation as the development of that which in a certain moment is given and considered unalienable. This pacifying vision has dominated the political scene of liberal democracies – in particular

¹⁰ Cf. "Entretien de Michel Foucault avec Jean François et John De Wit, 22 mai 1981", in Michel Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice. Cours de Louvain, 1981* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2012), 247–262, 260.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 65

¹² Cf. Arianna Sforzini, "Michel Foucault entre histoire et fiction", in *Imagination et histoire: enjeux contemporains*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes (2014), 29–38.

¹³ Ernst Bloch, *Experimentum mundi* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1975), 26.

¹⁴ Sforzini, "Michel Foucault entre histoire et fiction".

in the EU context – in an epoch of the “liberation of critique”¹⁵ (or the deterioration of true critique into the reassuring and harmless format of “critical thinking”¹⁶) and of a profound ‘deficit of political creativity’.¹⁷

Extending the Concept of ‘Academic Freedom’

Consolidated around the foundational principles of the “market economy” and “free competition”, the “permanent reformism”¹⁸ of European liberal democracies tends to establish and protect these principles themselves as bringers of democracy and freedom. Indeed, the definitions of AF recently proposed in international agreements of the Council of Europe at European Higher Education Area (EHEA) level have mainly been conceived *in reaction* to external ‘pressures’ or ‘interferences’ on the part of political authorities.¹⁹ This more or less explicit reference primarily concerns the recent attacks (e.g. Hungary, Turkey, Belarus) and more generally anything that is considered a threat for European liberal democracies, in so far as it questions (or rejects) their values, including that of AF.

If we accept that the notion of AF is developed mainly *in reaction* to the illiberal drifts of some democracies in the EHEA area, would it be possible to go beyond a mere *reactive* conception of AF and *extend* it to other contexts as well?

The reference to the recent political attacks is certainly essential, and also has the merit of accelerating the discussion on the European level. Yet it has

¹⁵ The end of a historical phase characterized by the hegemony of critical thought in the humanities is a topos of the debate in recent years. Cf. for ex. Astrid Messerschmidt, “Von der Kritik der Befreiung zur Befreiung von Kritik? Erkundungen zu Bildungsprozessen nach Foucault”, *Pädagogische Korrespondenz* 36, 2 (2007): 44–59.

¹⁶ Differences between ‘critical thinking’ and criticism or critical theory are denounced on both sides and also discussed with reference to the legacies claimed by each, primarily Kantian. Associated with problem solving and decision making, critical thinking is among the new ‘skills’ required in neoliberal schools and universities (cf. The White House. “President Barack Obama’s State of the Union Address.” 28 January 2014). In fact, “neoliberalism is not primarily a particular mode of economic management, but rather a political rationality and mode of governmental reasoning” (Judith Butler, Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The performative in the political*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 149).

¹⁷ Ernst Hillebrand, “Une société de citoyens autonomes. Esquisse d’un projet social-démocrate pour le XXI^e siècle”, *Le Débat* 2010/2 (n° 159): 142–154, 151.

¹⁸ Cf. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

¹⁹ See for example Bologna Process, Paris Communiqué (2018).

also orientated the discussion mainly towards the question of *institutional autonomy*, that is, the universities independence in relation to the national government and its political power.²⁰ In addition, this presupposes that the academic community is a non-problematic space of autonomy and freedom, that must be protected and defended. Indeed, the assumption is that, in the absence of external attacks or pressure, a condition of autonomy and freedom *already exists*, which – although it can certainly be better defined and measured – does not need to be questioned. This becomes very clear, for instance, in the definition of the Academic Freedom index (AFi) indicators, the first global experiment in the measurement of AF:

First of all, it should be noted that we consider all undue interference by non-academic actors as infringements on academic freedom, meaning individuals and groups that are not scientifically trained university affiliates. Non-academic actors include individuals and groups such as politicians, party secretaries, externally appointed university management, businesses, foundations, other private funders, religious groups and advocacy groups. As a consequence, *we do not consider restrictions that are set by the academic community itself* as interference, including issues regarding research priorities, ethical and quality standards in research and publication, or standardized curricula aiming to enhance teaching.²¹

The definition of “interference” proposed here seems comprehensive, but in reality is only valid if it presupposes the existence of a “academic community” able to auto-determine itself in a free and autonomous way: a rather idealized and abstract idea of the academic community, which risks being completely disconnected from the *real* dynamics of the university in the times of neoliberalism. In other words, by only looking at ‘external interference’ or political pressures to such autonomy we might lose sight of the *concrete* political and socio-economic situation of today’s European liberal democracies.

For instance, according to the data collected by AFi, the major part of the EU countries would be ‘free’ from external political or economic pressure.²² But is this really the case, if – as we shall see – their scientific

²⁰ On the prevalence of ‘institutional autonomy’ over AF see Sjur Bergan and Ira Harkavy, *Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and the Engaged University*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Higher Education Series no. 24 (2020): 15–28, 22, and Zgaga, *Standard-setting Instrument on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy*, 10. On the confusion between AF and institutional autonomy see Karran, “Academic Freedom in Europe,” 169.

²¹ Janika Spannagel et al., *The Academic Freedom Index and Other New Indicators Relating to Academic Space: An Introduction*, V-Dem Institute Users Working Paper (University of Gothenburg, 2020), 7.

²² <https://www.gppi.net/2021/03/11/free-universities>

communities define their research priorities, quality standards, or teaching curricula according to market dynamics *already* assimilated in their research practices?

From this point of view it is the very distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ that is highly problematic. Indeed, over the last few years, academics, students, researchers and an increasingly consistent secondary literature have shown how new systems of control – such as evaluation and assessment practices – function because they are *embedded* in the environment to which they are applied, modifying it profoundly, while making themselves indistinguishable from it, excluding internal differences. As we shall see, the objective of these managerial control devices is indeed an indirect “conducting of conduct”: “not to compel, but to lead individual to conduct themselves in conformity with certain norms”,²³ releasing autonomous rationalities of self-government and self-control (self-empowerment, self-management, self-accountability, etc.). Here we are not dealing with form of control and restriction through a direct exercise of violence or repression, but through managerial devices incorporated and implemented by the scientific community itself: “peers, far from being a buffer against the audit Society, may in fact operate as its ambassadors”.²⁴

Precisely these kind of restrictions, more indirect and less visible, are excluded a priori by a logic operating according to a binary opposition ‘inside-outside’ or ‘center-periphery’ – a logic that therefore only considers ‘outside’ attacks, on the ‘periphery’ in relation to a non-questionable ‘centre’ of freedom. Furthermore, the very possibility of freely criticizing such restrictions is systematically excluded, as being irrelevant (not even for the formulation of an indicator²⁵). But if we view the “academics’ and students’ level of public criticism of the government”²⁶ as a vital sign of AF, would it not be equally valid to consider the criticisms of academia from its very inside – the

²³ Pierre Dardot, “Qu’est-ce que la rationalité néolibérale?”, in *L’appel des appels. Pour une insurrection des consciences*, ed. Barbara Cassin, et al. (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2009), 293–306.

²⁴ Michael Power, “Research Evaluation in the Audit Society”, in *Wissenschaft unter Beobachtung. Effekte und Defekte von Evaluationen*, ed. Hildegard Matthies, Dagmar Simon (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008), 15–24, 20.

²⁵ See Spannagel et al., *The Academic Freedom Index*, 8: “Under authoritarian conditions, we presume that the social sciences are, typically, under stricter control by the state. In contrast, financially profitable sciences are likely more exposed to the influence of corporate money.” However, the latter – defined only as ‘influence’ and not as a form of ‘control’ – is not considered for the development of an indicator.

²⁶ Ibid. 5.

free expression and dissensus – as a sign of a free, non-normalized academy? Is establishing a difference in value between the freedom of critique of restrictions and ‘external’ violence, and the freedom to criticize ‘internal’ dynamics, in itself not already a limitation of freedom?

For these reasons a schematic analysis, projected only towards ‘external’ risks, but myopic towards the neoliberal dynamics and deaf to the academic community that for years has been denouncing these restrictions, risks losing sight of the complexity of the problem. This leads to the deterioration and paralysis of ‘critique’ we have mentioned, and its replacement by a merely *abstract* exercise of defining an *abstract* universal AF-formula. This formulaic and a-critical approach, lacking of any specificity, ultimately facilitates an instrumentalization of the concept, that today appears in fact prevalent in the system of governance and of ‘evidence based’, result-oriented knowledge policies. AF has lapsed into a kind of ‘quality label’: a managerial way to certify the quality of research and of education, thereby adding several more indicators to an already endless battery of ‘objective’ indicators which are used today for a ‘steering at a distance’ of the world around us, and to bypass traditional forms of democratic governments, benefitting the neoliberal form of government usually termed ‘governance’.²⁷ What Pavel Zgaga writes about “Autonomy could also be said of AF: it “is no longer an exclusively ‘philosophical concept’; today it is perhaps more often discussed as an ‘instrumental’ concept.”²⁸

On the basis of these premises, our contribution aims to investigate whether and to what extent this neoliberal mode of governance within most of European democracies today has shaped the concept of AF. In this way, we intent to interrogate *the very extension of the concept of AF*. While the role that the illiberal drifts have played in shaping the understanding of AF is evident, we propose to *broaden* the discussion by also including the transformation of higher education within European liberal democracies themselves, in particular with regards to the social-economic dynamics with which the university constantly has to deal. By doing this we propose to retrieve the complexity and a critical awareness of the concept, and contribute to a discussion that does not limit itself exclusively to its instrumental use.

²⁷ Cf. Alain Deneault, *Gouvernance: Le management totalitaire* (Montreal: Lux Editeur, 2013); William Walters, “Some critical notes on ‘governance’”, *Studies in Political Economy*, 73 (2004): 27–46.

²⁸ Zgaga, *Standard-setting Instrument on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy*, 13.

Control Society and the 'Crisis' of the University

The idea of a paralysis of the imagination, just mentioned to describe the neoliberal epoch, recalls Mark Fisher's thesis of a "reflexive impotence"²⁹ that would imprison world democracies today. The 'end of history' theorised by Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin Wall, repudiated by the facts and even Fukuyama himself,³⁰ would have been introjected on a cultural level and become ideological support for a regime that, according to Fisher's hyperbolic description, because of its "totalitarian and anti-democratic" form, reminds of the traits of socialist realism. An indisputable domination of the market and its truth, a "stalinism of the market"³¹ supported by a new, suffocating bureaucracy, by a new iron cage made of indicators and timetables, of networks and relationship, "aims and objectives", outcomes, "mission statement"³² would block Western democracies. As is clear, this reading of our present as an epoch enveloped in a process of de-democratisation³³ is decisive for our theme, all the more if we direct our gaze towards countries such as those of the EU that have made democracy and freedom to the status of a distinctive sign, even of superiority, over the rest of the world.

In this provocative images of Fisher one can in fact view the condensation of a wide-ranging critical literature,³⁴ diversified but unanimous in registering, if not the deterioration of freedom and democracy – in that which has been defined by several authors as a "post-democracy"³⁵ – certainly their general impoverishment, even if not in the usual forms of repression and coercion, but in those of 'control', which is not itself opposed to freedom, *but is exercised through it*: "individuals are controlled through their own freedom."³⁶

²⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21.

³⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992) and "The 'End of History' 20 Years Later", *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 27, no.1 (2013): 7–10.

³¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

³³ Cf. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: zone books, 2015).

³⁴ See for example Joseph Stiglitz, who 2008 already writes about "market fundamentalism" ("The End of Neo-liberalism?", *Project Syndicate*, Jul 7, 2008).

³⁵ Cf. Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Oxford: Polity, 2004).

³⁶ Annie Vinokur, "La normalisation de l'université", in *Gouverner par les standards et indicateurs. De Hume aux rankings*, ed. Benoît Frydman et al. (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 2014).

In fact, this control does not seem to refer to anything strictly illiberal, to a subject exercising power, but instead to rather anonymous and impersonal devices, by which it can present itself as horizontally diffuse democratic control, a guarantee for citizens-customers, tax payers. In other words, nothing that touches the physical body or the mind of citizens, as in antidemocratic or dictatorial regimes. It rather concerns the “transformation of the entire government function into a control function”,³⁷ a control exercised at a distance, acting ‘systemically’ on the environment. “Steering at a distance”, “governing by number”, “governing by results” are the most common designations of this “environmental technology”³⁸ of government, that aims not to compress or to “restrain” freedom, but to distribute “the living in the domain of value and utility”.³⁹ Yet however we may describe our present condition – as the dictatorship of algorithms⁴⁰, the tyranny of transparency,⁴¹ Audit Society,⁴² or as the Evaluative State⁴³ – these various forms converge in the recognition that public politics have been reframed in a managerial sense.

For this reason, the New Public Management that has emerged since the 1980s does not encompass a retreat of the state in favour of the natural goodness of the market (according to the vulgate of neoliberalism), but, on the contrary, implies continuous and widespread interventions of the state, committed to creating the conditions for the effective functioning of the competitive market, despite the fact that “neoliberal rhetoric about the end of top-down, centralized control has gained pre-eminence.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Foucault’s thesis according to which “Neoliberalism should not therefore be identified with *laissez-faire*, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention”⁴⁵ finds broad consensus.

³⁷ Valeria Pinto, “La valutazione come strumento di intelligence e tecnologia di governo”, *Aut Aut*, 360 (2013): 16–42, 19.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 259.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 144.

⁴⁰ See Antoniette Rouvroy, Thomas Berns, “Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d’émancipation”, *Réseaux*, no. 177 (2013): 163–196.

⁴¹ Cf. Vincent Rzepka, *Die Ordnung der Transparenz. Jeremy Bentham und die Genealogie einer demokratischen Norm* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013); Valeria Pinto, “Trasparenza. Una tirannia della luce”, in *Genealogie del presente. Lessico politico per tempi interessanti*, ed. Federico Zappino et al. (Udine: Mimesis, 2014), 231–248.

⁴² Cf. Michael Power, *The Audit Society. Rituals of Verification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴³ Cf. Guy Neave, *The Evaluative State, Institutional Autonomy and Re-engineering Higher Education in Western Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 40.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *The Birth of the Biopolitics*, 132.

The transformation of the entire function of government into a function of control certainly applies to knowledge policies (all the more so in ‘knowledge society’), with interventions that have revolutionised the meaning and the function of the university and the very meaning of AF in our society. The recent protests in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK against the restrictions of traditional freedoms of those who work in academia cannot be ignored.⁴⁶ Yet a state of paroxysmal control is the condition in which academia permanently finds itself. In the ‘knowledge society’, as has often been noted, and in the very places dedicated to the production and the dissemination of knowledge, knowledge is continually obstructed. In its place we find ‘research and development’, research projects that for 90 % will never be financed,⁴⁷ provision of ‘competences’ and ‘skills’, ‘technology transfers’, constructions of networks and partnerships with various kinds of public and private entities, mass production of ‘scientific products’ and publications, which only respond to the demands of productivity imposed by various assessment bodies that govern academia at various levels today (‘rubbish or perish’ replaces the already unfortunate ‘publish or perish’). In a book from 2015 on the French university, Christof Granger makes a general observation that is surprisingly obvious yet forgotten:

The university was not always this thing in the throes of collapse. The rhetoric of *crisis* in the name of which it is now being judged, reformed, destroyed, almost makes one forget this fact. In relating everything to the present, to its urgencies, to the instantaneous need to adapt to the *reality of today’s world*, a world without a past, without a future, entirely swallowed up in the exigencies of the moment, it organises – therein lies its deception – what probably constitutes the most effective and baleful weapon of all neoliberal ideology: *the oblivion of genealogies*. But if the university is what it is today, it owes it first and foremost to the existence of

⁴⁶ Various movements have sprung up to protest against the corporate university model. We should mention at least: in Italy; “Università del futuro”, “Disintossichiamoci. Sapere per il futuro” (over 1600 adhesions), and the ‘Coordinamento delle Riviste di Filosofia’ (CoRiFi), in France: “Appel des Appels”, “L’Internationale des Savoirs pour Tous”, “Université Ouverte”, “Sciences en danger, revues en lutte”, in Germany: “The Slow Science” (followed in France by a similar manifesto “Slow Science – La désexcellence”), “GEW-Wissenschaftskonferenz “Gut – besser – exzellent?”, “Ich bin Hanna”, in the Netherlands: “Humanities Rally” and “ReThink UvA”, in UK: “Reclaiming Our University”, and recently – on the confrontation with the ‘Cancel Culture’ – the movement “No platform”. A partial documentation can be read at <https://academia.hypotheses.org/lheure-est-greve-et-confinement/dissent-in-european-higher-education>.

⁴⁷ See e.g. the success rate of ERC projects, which in recent years has fluctuated between 8 % and 16 %: <https://erc.europa.eu/news/applications-erc-starting-grants-2022-facts-and-figures>.

a long tradition, the name of which no longer says much to us, and which it has got rid of all at once. The condition in which it finds itself today must be placed entirely within the framework of the formation and then disappearance, in our societies, of the conditions for the existence of a world dedicated to the things of knowledge.⁴⁸

This thesis is not so paradoxical and isolated as it may seem if we consider the vast catastrophic literature, from the unsurpassable classic of Bill Readings onwards⁴⁹, that has characterised the reflection on the transformation of the university, declaring in various ways its death, or worse, its reduction to a zombie-like state.⁵⁰

With the image of the 'university in ruins', Readings describes this ambiguous state, this liminal space that is neither life nor death, indicating the presence of a past that has not disappeared but is irredeemable. An interesting conceptual equivalent to this image is that of *dereferentialization*, coined by Readings. This indicates the emptying of content of concepts that have lost all their specific referents, and precisely for that reason have become usable in a generic fashion. An example is the concept of "excellence", of which "the universal applicability" (it is what "we all agree on") "is in direct relation to its emptiness", or non-referentiality.⁵¹ Even the term 'university' itself does "no longer refer to a specific set of things or ideas",⁵² facilitating the shift of its meaning to its socio-economic "function" (e.g. accountability).⁵³ In the same way, in the process of globalisation, the reference to the nation state has disappeared: the market, the cash-nexus, advances as the only border and *form* of "the university of excellence".

In this respect, we can ask ourselves if also the concept of AF has not suffered the same fate. Indeed, is this concept not defined today precisely on the basis of a logic of applicability and functionalization? In the moment in which AF is only understood in its instrumental sense, usable only with the end of measuring, or evaluation, every specific referent is indeed excluded *a priori*. It does not only concern an emptying of its content – from an

⁴⁸ Christophe Granger, *La Destruction de l'université française* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2015), 17.

⁴⁹ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵⁰ Cf. John Smyth, *The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars and Neoliberal Ideology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). See also Thomas Biebricher et al., "Beschwörungen des Neoliberalismus. Theorien und Schauplätze", *Normative Orders Working Paper*, 02/2012.

⁵¹ Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 23.

⁵² Ibid. 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

increasing abstraction of the concept (that has already been criticized various times⁵⁴) – but a *systematical substitution* with a list of data and indicators of performativity, useful for ‘evidence-based policy’, which claims to be objective. But politics is different from *policy*: the former must be *informed* about what happens, also through numbers and indicators, but must not be *formed* by numbers and indicators.⁵⁵ For this reason it is important to ask: is it possible to go in a direction different from the formulistic approach⁵⁶ that today informs AF, and to imagine a different conceptualization?

The interpretation of Readings – the first to link the crisis of the university with the phenomenon of ‘*dereferentialization*’ – offers some hope. This phenomenon, Readings maintains, can still become a *productive condition*. “Rather than nostalgically lamenting lost origin,” as a commentator notes, “Readings encourages us to question how we can ‘reimagine the university’, once the guiding idea of culture has ceased to have an essential function”⁵⁷. The solution does not consist in the attempt of reconstructing the ruins of the old Humboldtian university – or rather its myth (the university as an “ivory

⁵⁴ For example, Karran, “Academic Freedom in Europe,” 168.

⁵⁵ On this aspect, there is a very heated debate on its philosophical, epistemological, sociological, and political dimensions. Indeed, critics of neoliberal policies contest the very concept of ‘evidence’ as it is conceived and used in ‘evidence-based’ policy practices. In fact, is it not ‘policy-based evidence’ rather than ‘evidence-based policy’? Is it ‘cherry-picked-evidence’ we are dealing with here – that is evidence constructed from a given policy choice and perspective, obviously legitimate, but with the illegitimate claim to be objective? For a first orientation see: Bronwyn Davies, “Death to Critique and Dissent? The Policies and Practices of New Managerialism and of ‘Evidence-based Practice’”, *Gender and Education* 15, 1 (2003): 91–103; Ray Pawson, *Evidence-Based Policy. A Realist Perspective*, Thousand Oaks (London: SAGE Publications, 2006); Amelia Sharman and John Holmes, “Evidence-Based Policy or Policy-Based Evidence Gathering? Biofuels, the EU and the 10 % Target”, *Environmental Policy and Governance* 20 (2010): 309–321; Kevin E. Davis et al. (ed.), *Governance by Indicators Global Power through Quantification and Rankings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Holger Straßheim, “Politics and policy expertise: Towards a political epistemology”, in *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*, ed. Frank Fischer et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015), 319–340; Romuald Normand, *The Changing Epistemic Governance of European Education. The Fabrication of the Homo Academicus Europeanus?* (Cham: Springer, 2016).

⁵⁶ See for example Kirsten Roberts Lyer et al., *University Autonomy Decline. Causes, Responses, and Implications for Academic Freedom* (Oxon-New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁵⁷ Richard Hudson-Miles, “‘Let Us Build a City and a Tower’. Figures of the University in Gregor Reisch’s (1503) *Margarita Philosophica*”, in *The Social Production of Knowledge in a Neoliberal Age. Debating the Challenges Facing Higher Education* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022): 109–126, 111.

tower”): “We should not attempt to bring about a rebirth or renaissance of the University” – Readings warns – “but think its ruins as a sedimentation of historical differences that remind us that Thought cannot be present to itself.” For Readings this genealogical exercise permits us to rethink “dereferentialization” as a “space of strategic possibility”.

We live in an institution, and we live outside it. We work there, and we work with what we have at hand [...]. The question of the University is not that of how to achieve a stable or perfect relation between inside and outside, between the ivory tower and the streets [...]⁵⁸

The idea proposed here is therefore neither autoreferential ‘closure’, nor an ‘open university’ – in the sense of dereferentialization of the neoliberal university – nor a mediation between the two. It concerns rather the difficult exercise of a critical attitude that goes beyond both: “change comes neither from within, nor from without, but from the difficult space – neither inside nor outside – where one is”.⁵⁹ Taking up Readings suggestion, we intend to propose – as we shall discuss further on – to understand this ‘space’ as heterotopic space: a rewriting the Humboldtian idea of ‘freedom and isolation’ in a completely new form.

Magna Charta and ‘the Double Risk’

The Humboldtian principle of ‘freedom and isolation’ (*Freiheit und Einsamkeit*), despite its historical transformations, has in fact remained a central reference until the 1980s; it was seen as a regulative ideal aimed at ensuring the distance between university and society in order to guarantee the former’s independence, necessary precisely in order to fulfill its social role in the best possible way. Humboldt himself insisted, in fact, on a concept of autonomy based not on separation, but rather on a specific ‘working together’ (*Zusammenwirken*) of the university, society and the state⁶⁰ – an idea that can be

⁵⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Humboldt, *Über die innere und äussere Organisation*, 193. In this “working together”, which is “uninterrupted, constantly self-renewing, but unforced and without specific purpose”, the state must be aware that “it is always an impediment as soon as it interferes” in the exercise of a science which is “something that has not been and can never be entirely found”, and which according to Humboldt has to be constantly pursued. Conversely, however, university institutions must realise that “that there must needs exist in the positive society external forms and means for any activity on a broader scale”. (Ibid. 194, our translation).

found in the first sentence of the Fundamental principles of *Magna Charta* (1988): “The university is an autonomous institution *at the heart* of societies [...]”.⁶¹

Throughout the twentieth century many aspects of Humboldt’s reflections seems to have been forgotten or simplified. His name has been used as a symbol for the ‘classical’ model of a research University, a ‘Humboldtian university’, which maybe only existed as a fantasma in the heads of its advocates, or in a mythical form in the thought of those who inherited their idealistic ideas.⁶² Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a true ‘Humboldtian model’ of autonomy – as reality, myth, ideal, or projection of a lost past that might have never existed – became a target in the public discourses on the Bologna Process, in the ideas of modernization directed against the ‘ivory-tower thinking’ that inspired national policies in the major part of the European countries that adhered to the Process. Humboldt is present “in almost every European discussion on the mission and future of higher education and research”,⁶³ so much so that Johan Olsen defines the transition towards a new European order of higher education directly ‘Anti-Humboldt’. It is indeed in the context of the discussion on the *end of the Humboldtian model* that a ‘reconceptualization’ of the university was launched, in which the “reformers [...] defy a European heritage that has not only experienced the state as a threat to institutional and individual autonomy, but also as the guardian of autonomy”.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Magna Charta Universitatum* (Bologna: 1988), par. 1.

⁶² It can certainly be argued that already at the beginning of the 20th century the ‘Humboldtian university’ was only the projection of a decayed intellectual class. Weber speaks openly of the transformation of departments into industries, and of an existence that had become as precarious as that of any ‘proletaroid’, even for a department head. See Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919), in *Max Weber Schriften 1894–1922* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2002), 477; See also Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of German Mandarin. The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1969). On “Humboldt’s myth” see: Mitchell Ash, “Bachelor of What, Master of Whom? The Humboldt Myth and Historical Transformations of Higher Education in German-Speaking Europe and the US”, *European Journal of Education* 41.2, (2006): 245–267, 247.

⁶³ Thorsten Nybom, “The Humboldt Legacy: Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of the European University”, in *Higher Education Policy* 16 (2003): 141–159, 141; Moreover “the Humboldtian model had an equally profound impact in the USA” (Karran, “Academic Freedom in Europe,” 167). See also *Managing University Autonomy. Shifting Paradigms in University Research*. Proceedings of the Seminar of the Magna Charta Observatory. Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2003.

⁶⁴ Olsen, *Democratic Government, Institutional Autonomy and the Dynamics of Change*, 66, 69, 70.

In the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, this principle was replaced by the idea of 'autonomy and evaluation', watchwords intended to ensure a continuous and rapid adjustment between the university and the interests of post-industrial society. The organisational-administrative conception of 'autonomy' here establishes itself beyond any connection to the traditional (and philosophical) concepts of independence and AF, and rather becomes identified – as a document of the World Bank of 1994 explains well – with a “decentralisation of all key management functions” [...] a *sine qua non* for [...] more efficient use of resources”⁶⁵, of which the result, as Guy Neave noted, is that

⁶⁵ The World Bank, *Higher Education. The Lessons of Experience* (1994), 63–64. The role of the Word Bank – which is “at the centre of the major changes in global education of our time [...] as a major purveyor of western ideas about how education and the economy are, or should be connected” (Phillip W. Jones, *World Bank Financing of Education. Lending, Learning and Development*, London: Routledge, 1992, ix) – is well recognised in the secondary literature (see e.g. Stephen J. Ball, *The Education Debate*, Bristol: The Policy Press, 2008, 32; especially the chapter “Education and the World Bank”). Together with other “transnational actors” such as UNESCO, OECD, and IMF – which “are central to the propagation of worldwide patterns and trends in the field of education” in the perspective of “de-regulation of state systems” (Alberto Amaral and Antonio Magalhaes, “Epidemiology and the Bologna Saga”, *Higher Education*, 48 (2004): 79–100, 80–81) – this role is performed through particular mediating structures – for example, the World Bank’s Knowledge Assessment Methodology (Susan Robertson, “Globalisation, Education Governance and Citizenship Regimes: New Democratic Deficits and Social Injustices” in *Handbook of Social Justice in Education*, ed. W. Ayers, T. Quinn, and D. Stovall, London: Routledge, 2009, 542–553), the Open Method of Coordination guiding European-level governance (Roger Dale, “Forms of governance, governmentality, and the EU’s open method of coordination”, in *Global Governmentality*, ed. Wendy Larner and William Walters, London: Routledge, 2004: 174–194), the progressing of the Bologna Process (Roger Dale, “Shifting Discourses and Mediating Structures in the Co-construction of Europe, Knowledge and Universities”, in *European Discourses of the Knowledge-based Economy*, ed. Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008, 193–205; Ruth Keeling, “The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Research Agenda”, *European Journal of Education*, 41.2 2006: 203–223), and the OECD’s PISA indicator (Susan L. Robertson, Roger Dale, “The World Bank, the IMF and the Possibilities of Critical Education”, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*, ed. Michael W. Apple et al. New York/London: Routledge, 2009, 23–35). The role of the Word Bank is also recognised in the evaluation mechanisms proposed by the European Commission, such as “the so-called ‘Multidimensional Research Assessment Matrix’ (EC 2010c)” elaborated “through a recent Feasibility Study (see U-multirank) (with BUSINESSEUROPE amongst the participants) and the report of an ‘Expert Group on Assessment of University-Based Research’ (with a World Bank representative)” (Stavros Moutsios, *Academic Autonomy and the Bologna*

“never in recent times has higher education been more externally driven” than over the course of the past decade.⁶⁶

This leads to what Readings defines, with reference to Fukuyama, as the epoch of the ‘post-historical university’: the university adequate to the globalised world, or to use an expression of Sloterdijk, adequate to the world unified by “the world interior of capital”.⁶⁷ This means the abolition of the classical model of academia and its idea of freedom, to a radical reformulation of the social mission of the university, that Slavoj Žižek has described as “a massive and concerted attack” on what Immanuel Kant called the “public use of reason”.⁶⁸

The urge to subordinate higher education to the needs of society, to make it useful for the solution of concrete problems we are facing, to produce expert opinions meant to answer problems posed by social agents. What disappears here is the true task of thinking: not only to offer solutions to problems posed by “society” (which is defined by the conjunction of state and capital), but to reflect on the very form of these “problems” in the first place, to re-formulate them, to discern the problem in the very way we perceive such problems. The reduction of higher education to the task of producing socially-useful expert knowledge is the paradigmatic form of the “private use of reason” in today’s global capitalism.⁶⁹

Standing in complete opposition to the principle of distance, the “new contract” is characterised by the *Tuning Project*,⁷⁰ conform to the demands of the post-industrial economy: that which would go under the name of “the third

Process, Aarhus: Aarhus University, 2012, 17). If it is true that “the role of the World Bank as an agent of neo-liberal globalisation is often criticised”, however “the criticism is usually not well-substantiated because the relevant technical documentation, labelled ‘For official use only’, is not available to the public”: Particularly significant at this level are some “projects implemented in the Eastern European region” whose high level of opacity has been denounced. See Voldemar Tomusk, “The Rise of the Transnational Capitalist Class and World Bank ‘Aid’ for Higher Education,” *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 12:3, 335–352 (2002), 345.

⁶⁶ Guy Neave, “Higher Education Policy as an Exercise in Contemporary History”, *Higher Education*, 32 (1996): 403–415, 404. Cf. also Thomas Piketty, “Autonomie des Universités: l’imposture”, *La Découverte – Revue du MAUSS* (2009/1): 283–285.

⁶⁷ Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 2006).

⁶⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome in Interesting Times!*, in *Living in the End Times* (London-New York: Verso Books, 2011), 411.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Cf. Tuning Project, *Universities’ Contribution to the Bologna Process. An Introduction*, Universidad de Deusto: http://tuningacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Universities-Contribution_EN.pdf.

mission" (indeed increasingly a metonymy for the entire *mission* of the university) and which is also used to describe the dependency of the university on the so-called "stakeholder society".⁷¹ Having freed oneself from the 'Humboldtian myth', the university thus 'opens itself' to a new myth: a society that in reality has become something completely different than the 'public thing' (*res publica*). Indeed, it is the antithesis of what once was considered "public" as a sphere other than that of domestic and family interests (*oikos nomos*), or "the rise of the 'household' (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm",⁷² the sphere of the private interests made visible and transparent – and only in this sense 'public'.

From this viewpoint, the myth of an 'openness towards society' corresponds in reality to an openness to the dynamics of the market, that do not overcome but reinforce the differences of class. Imposing the 'knowledge economy' and the rise of the entrepreneurial university has indeed led to new enclosure (taxes, numerus clausus and in general meritocratic politics) that in many respects have advantaged those who were already advantaged, creating new inequalities.⁷³

This aspect has not gone unnoticed in the European debate. Already the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988), the first European agreement on common values and rights of higher education, pays specific attention to all the threats to AF raised by the new globalised and 'open' university. In the

⁷¹ Cf. Bruce A. Ackerman, Anne Alstot, *The Stakeholder Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Ivar Bleiklie, "The Social Foundations of the Evaluative State and the Universities as Stakeholder Organisations", in *Towards a Cartography of Higher Education Policy Change. A Festschrift in Honour of Guy Neave*, Enschede: Center for Higher Education Policy Studies CHEPS (2007): 97–103. The term 'stakeholder' has originated within the corporate world, where it stands for "any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation's purpose." (Edward Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Boston: Pitman, 1984, vi).

⁷² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) 33.

⁷³ It has indeed been pointed out that "contrary to the intentions of the reform, individuals from socially vulnerable families are still disadvantaged because the two-tier structure seems to create new inequalities in the higher education system" (Martina Kroher et al., *Did the "Bologna Process" Achieve Its Goals? 20 Years of Empirical Evidence on Student Enrollment*, IZA – Institute of Labor Economics, (Bonn: 2021), 10. The new idea of autonomy appeared in fact as a Trojan horse to introduce a privatist model of the university. For the major beneficiaries of the mass university, the reforms represented the end of the university model linked to the social policies of the welfare state. In place of the old elites, or in addition to them, new 'global' elites have imposed themselves, in a society with constantly increasing inequalities and growing processes of concentration and centralisation of economic, financial, and reputational capital.

Charta, the recognition of the diverse demands of the contemporary world and the task of addressing the whole of society is in fact accompanied by the claim of continuing the heritage of ‘European humanism’, as well as its foundation in cultures of “different historical and geographic situations”. Above all, it stresses that the autonomy and freedom of universities in the new situation are exposed to a “*double risk*”: the pressures from political power as well as the economical sphere.

The university is an *autonomous institution* at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching *must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power*.⁷⁴

Hence, the *Charta* recognises how economic power can function, in the same way as political power, as the principle of authority: as such, it externally determines the practices of research and education according to criteria and aims (such as growth and profit) that do not themselves belong to these practices. The risk of the functionalisation of research and education and its implications for AF are clear.

Despite this recognition in the *Charta*, the reference to the economic factor as a “risk” seems to disappear in the subsequent EU and EHEA declarations and statements which address the issue of AF. The UNESCO Recommendation (1997), for instance, – the first international declaration that contains a definition of AF⁷⁵ and a fundamental reference for the European debate on values in higher education – exclusively “expresses concern” with “the vulnerability of the academic community to untoward *political pressures* which could undermine academic freedom”.⁷⁶ Possible violations of the principle of AF that the document mentions only concern general forms of “interferences”: censorship, repression, discrimination, or other restrictions, mostly indicating limitations by political authorities.⁷⁷ Any reference to economic pressures is also absent in the series of Ministerial Communiqués of the Council of Europe addressing AF from the past few years: Yerevan (2015), Paris (2018) and lastly the Statement included in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020), that for the first time

⁷⁴ *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988), par. 1. While considering the new global set-up, the new *Magna Charta Universitatum* of 2020 also reiterates this ‘double risk’ in the same terms: <https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020>.

⁷⁵ UNESCO, *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* (Paris: 1997), art. 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Preamble.

⁷⁷ Ibid. art. 25–32.

proposes an internationally agreed definition of AF. Also the AFi – main reference for the BFUG Working Group on Fundamental Values also focusing on AF – does not include in its indicators any reference to economic or financial constraints, but mainly refers to political threats (e.g. “censorships”, “intimidations”) towards the democratic values according to which the university operates.⁷⁸

The “double risk” mentioned in the *Magna Charta* is thus *marginalised* in the discussion around AF in the framework of the development of Bologna Process and the EHEA. Yet there are two exceptions: the *Recommendation* n. 1762 and the *Resolution* n. 2352 of the Council of Europe.

Social Responsibility as Accountability

The *Recommendation* 1762 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 2006 is the first document among the Council of Europe’s communiqués to textually refer to the *Magna Charta* and the first document approved by the highest political forum to propose a definition of AF and institutional autonomy that puts the idea of “social and cultural responsibility” of the university at its centre.⁷⁹ The notion of responsibility here is also understood as ‘accountability’ and is significantly presented as the *other side* of AF itself: “the social and cultural responsibility and accountability of universities

⁷⁸ The AFI dataset was co-developed by Janika Spannagel, Ilyas Saliba and Katrin Kinzelbach at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg and by the team at the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg. See Kinzelbach et al., *Free Universities: Putting the Academic Freedom Index into Action* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2020) 7. Although the AFi codebook itself (Michael Coppedge, et al. *V-Dem Codebook v11.1*. Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem, Project. University of Gothenburg: Gothenburg, March 2021: <https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/img/refs/codebookv11.1.pdf>.) emphasizes the insufficiency of the indicators already formulated by previous Freedom House and V-Dem measurement projects, as they ‘focus mainly on political expression’, AFi does not seem to change this approach. The formulation of the five AFi indicators does not refer to restrictions coming from economic powers and/or monopolies. The very definition of ‘restriction’, as Felix Hoffmann and Katrin Kinzelbach point out, excludes “the impact of economic development on university life, as well as general insecurity due to conditions of limited statehood, are outside the scope of the definition even though these factors undoubtedly impact the feasibility of conducting academic research.” (Felix Hoffmann and Katrin Kinzelbach, *Forbidden Knowledge, Academic Freedom and Political Repression in the University Sector Can Be Measured. This Is How*, GPPI, 9, Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2018).

⁷⁹ The notion of ‘responsibility’ was in fact marginally present in the first phase of the Bologna process (only in the Prague Communiqué 2001) but became central in the Council of Europe discussion and in the work of CDESIR.

to the public and to their mission are to be considered as the unavoidable other side of academic liberties”.⁸⁰

This merging of responsibility and accountability is not surprising: the same concept of “social responsibility” derives in fact from the corporate world. This also applies to the appeal of the *Recommendation* to the idea of responsibility that goes beyond an immediate *responsiveness* to the demands of society and market-needs⁸¹ and seems to value the independence “of all political or religious authority and economic power”. This independence is linked to managerial procedures of *assessments* and *evaluations*, and is anchored in the *performance* rendered in favour of demands⁸² of society and the market, which should be taken “seriously into account”.⁸³ Universities – as we read a bit further in the document – should “comply with certain demands of the market and the business world”.⁸⁴ In this way, “accountability, transparency and quality assurance” – procedures aimed at guaranteeing the principles of free market and competition – are established as “preconditions for granting universities academic freedom and institutional autonomy”.⁸⁵

We can therefore argue that the idea of AF proposed by the *Recommendation* does not overlook the *Magna Charta*, but in taking it up neutralises it. Even if this document seems to valorise AF in a way that is not dependent on aims external to knowledge itself, it prioritises the compliance with economic needs, only conceding in a residual manner that AF should not be reduced to them. From this it clearly shows how, more than an increasing *shift in meaning* – from the ‘responsibility’ of the university in relation to its social commitment to an outcome-orientated ‘accountability’ – we can observe an *increasing dissolution* of an ambivalence that seems to be summarised by the very notion of ‘social responsibility’.⁸⁶ Once the true meaning of this notion becomes clearer, it also becomes explainable that the university tends to

⁸⁰ Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, *Recommendation 1762 on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy* (Strasbourg: 2006), 6.

⁸¹ *Recommendation 1762*, par. 8.

⁸² *Ibid.* par.7.

⁸³ *Ibid.* par.8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* par.10.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* par.11.

⁸⁶ See the glossary of the Common Assessment Framework of the Conference of Italian University Rectors: “the term is borrowed from the world of private enterprise. In fact, in that context the social value of business was emphasised and special tools were developed to highlight it, such as the Social Responsibility Balance [...]. The theme has also been taken up for the public sector [...]; in particular, [...] the aspect of citizen participation in the discussion of government budgets has been emphasised, the aspect of accountability” (CRUI Foundation, *CAF Università. Il modello europeo*

justify its role through the accountability of the benefits it brings to society in terms of objectively certifiable growth and employment. The added value of education and the progress of knowledge becomes increasingly irrelevant, insofar as it is not made quantifiable, accountable and monetizable.⁸⁷ It thus becomes consistent, from the point of view of the academic profession⁸⁸, that universities present a real 'social responsibility balance', such as the ones of a corporation that conforms to 'corporate social ethics'.⁸⁹

In this way, it almost seems natural that education is modeled more and more on economic criteria and aims, and that the relationship between university education and economic and market needs become ever more explicit. Even 'values' became an explicitly economic term, as it has been noted;⁹⁰ In the course of the first two decades of the Bologna Process the "systematic efforts to improve this relationship"⁹¹ reaches its goal: the relationship between education and economic needs becomes increasingly naturalised, without it even being considered necessary to define its character. In the "oblivion of genealogies", this relationship has simply become obvious.

di autovalutazione delle performance per le università, 2012, 138: http://qualitapa.gov.it/fileadmin/user_upload/Il_modello_Caf_Universita_.pdf).

⁸⁷ Evaluation aims to simulate the market, defining a quasi-currency for a quasi-market in areas traditionally unrelated to it (health, education, justice, etc.). It does not reflect but radically transforms the public dimension, its policies and its culture. See Valeria Pinto, *Valutare e punire. Per una critica della cultura della valutazione* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2019). See also number 360 of *Aut Aut*: "All'indice. Critica della cultura della valutazione", ed. Alessandro Dal Lago (2013) and vol. 128/129 of *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*: "Ce qu'évaluer voudrait dire", ed. Claudine Haroche et al. (2010).

⁸⁸ The reference here is to Weber's lecture on science as a profession and the concept of the ethics of responsibility (Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*).

⁸⁹ Social balance is not an obligation for universities, but it is now the norm. The *Direttiva del Ministro della Funzione Pubblica sulla rendicontazione sociale nelle Amministrazioni Pubbliche* (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Dipartimento della Funzione Pubblica, 2006) – whereby the Minister of the Civil Service urged public administrations to voluntarily adopt social reporting tools similar to those compulsory for companies – is a perfect example of a 'nudge', that bypass the democratic mediation of Parliament and the Law.

⁹⁰ Zgaga, *Standard-setting instrument on academic freedom and institutional autonomy*, 18. According to Zgaga (ibid. 17) the 'triangle' of the relationship between academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public responsibility should today rather form a 'square': a university autonomy, academic freedom, state and market forces relationship.

⁹¹ Eurydice, European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2020, Bologna Process Implementation Report* (Brussel 2020), 100.

Functionalising Knowledge

It is evident how European university culture has been denaturalised, and how a conception of ‘science’ has become widespread, in which it is no longer a research ‘activity’ but rather its ‘product’, immediately to be evaluated and ‘valorised’. *Knowledge* itself is increasingly replaced by skill and *competence*,⁹² expendable in the labour market. And although it is recognised that “higher education also has other purposes than providing society with highly skilled workers”,⁹³ the main – if not exclusive – concern has increasingly become meeting the needs of the labour market. Attention is focused in particular on the “discrepancy between graduates’ level of education or skills and the level of education or skills required by their job”, where the role of the university and the value of education comes down to resolving this discrepancy.⁹⁴ Education is no longer thought to have a value in itself – a value that returns as a benefit for the community – but thought to be only valid as a qualification expendable in the labour market, according to the principle of ‘international competitiveness’ (already stated in the Bologna Declaration of 1999⁹⁵). In this way, for example, in 2012 the European Council

⁹² Employability was a main focus of the Bologna Process from the very beginning, but recently the terms ‘competence’ and ‘skills’ for the job market seem to wholly replace that of ‘knowledge’, which can be perceived for instance in the “European strategy for universities” adopted in January 2022 (European Commission. *European strategy for universities*. Press Release: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_365). This aims to ‘create a new knowledge’, more fluid, with a “focus on the most needed skills and competences to face today’s economic and societal demands”. This is also followed by the Commission’s initiative to inaugurate 2023 as the ‘European Year of Skills’ (which follows the 2022 – ‘European Year of Youth’) where the role of higher education is central: European Commission. Commission kick-starts work on the European Year of Skills. News 2/10/2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10431&furtherNews=yes>.

⁹³ Eurydice, European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2020*, 113.

⁹⁴ Eurydice, European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2020*, 114. See: Cedefop, *The Skill Matching Challenge. Analysing Skill Mismatch and Policy Implications* (Luxembourg: 2010) which defines this discrepancy as “mismatch”, and uses it as an indicator to measure the value of ‘skills’ (in Cedefop report ‘skills’, ‘qualifications’ and ‘education’ are interchangeable terms: *ibid.* 13).

⁹⁵ Bologna Process, *Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education* (Bologna: 1999). Also the Lisbon European Council, *Presidency Conclusions* (Lisbon: 2000) embraced the objective of becoming “the most competitive and

stated that it is the task of Europe to strengthen “the ability to *transform research into innovations that respond to market needs*, thus enhancing European competitiveness and helping to meet societal challenges”. It is in order to “strengthen key enabling technologies which are of systemic importance for the innovativeness of industry and the whole economy [...]”,⁹⁶ that is necessary to complete the European Research Area. This call is also followed-up in the current discussion on new education formats, such as micro-credits, where the priority of ‘competence’ over ‘knowledge’ is not only evident, but also directly related to the democratic mission of the university:

One of the main drivers of the development of micro-credentials is that learners and employers appreciate a more flexible, time-efficient and individualized format of higher education programme to enable specific skills or competences to be acquired quickly for particular market needs [...] In theory, micro-credentials have the potential to make education more responsive to labour market needs and individual interests, allowing for flexibility and potentially also supporting learning among under-represented groups. Hence there is potential to democratise knowledge.⁹⁷

This transformation of the role and the purpose of the university within society at large has radical consequences for AE. The ‘fundamental right’ to knowledge and *free* research (free from heteronomous purposes) is strongly compromised in favour of *functional* knowledge: this fundamental right becomes a ‘functionalised’ right, subordinated to the ‘economic’ right of the community, and in this way already stands in contradiction with the principle of freedom.⁹⁸ At the same time, the reduction of education to its social-economic effects, which, as we have seen, is no longer not even perceived as such, also has contributed to creating an ever deeper chasm between areas of

dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’. See also: Maarten Simons, “The ‘Renaissance of the University’ in the European Knowledge Society: An Exploration of Principled and Governmental Approaches”, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26 (2007): 433–447.

⁹⁶ European Council, *Conclusions* (Brussels: 1–2 March 2012), par. 18.

⁹⁷ Eurydice, European Commission, *European Higher Education Area in 2020*, 161.

⁹⁸ See: Monica Bonini, “La ‘libertà’ di ricerca, dallo ‘Stato sociale nazionale’ al ‘welfare di mercato europeo’”, in *La ricerca scientifica tra stato e mercato*, ed. Lidianna Degrassi (Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, 2014): 71–73; Alessandro Pace, *Problematica delle libertà costituzionali* (Padova: Ceda 1992), 460; Roberta Calvano, *La legge e l’università pubblica: i principi costituzionali e il riassetto dell’università italiana* (Napoli: Jovene, 2012); Emiliano Bevilacqua and Davide Borrelli, “Non libera Università in non libero Stato. Del governo tecnico e della riduzione del possibile”, in *Etnografie del dissenso*, ed. Patrick Boumard et al. (Lecce: Pensa, 2017): 249–270.

study and research that respond to a criterion of utility, and those areas whose value is not immediately expendable. This divide has not only penalised the sphere of the latter,⁹⁹ but has also contributed to fuelling the suspicion – that Adorno already had intuited as early as the 1950s – that knowledge free from commercial, profit-making aims is subversive in relation to the principle of social utility:

But the condition of material production themselves barely tolerate that kind of experience with which the traditional content of education was attuned [...] this comes to strike at the vital nerve of education itself [...] On many occasions it stands, as an unpractical encumbrance and vain reluctance, already in the way of advancement.¹⁰⁰

Unchanged Format

In this context the question remains of why the ‘double risk’ (political and economic) indicated by the *Magna Charta* was abandoned. Guy Neave very rightly stresses that in our current situation, twenty years after this document, the terms in which autonomy and freedom are debated are quite different. The *Magna Charta* did represent an attempt to respond to risks posed by “changes in the steering of higher education systems in the mutating relationship between government, higher education and society at its broadest level”, a response that was clearly too weak or in any case too ineffective, since its idea of AF – even if it is embedded in the European tradition – did not find a follow-up. As Neave writes in 2008:

the difference is clearly to be seen in the shift from autonomy interpreted qua personal or positional freedom to its present definition in terms of institutional autonomy [...]. Such a shift in perspective has come about largely as a consequence of changes that in the meantime were introduced into the higher education systems of Western Europe at other levels, some national, and others regional, and in other spheres of government and national administration, notably funding, quality assessment, institutional evaluation and, more recently, accreditation procedures.¹⁰¹

Analysing the subsequent documents, it can indeed be said that the shift in perspective described by Neave has been consolidated.

⁹⁹ Bonini, *La “libertà” di ricerca*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Theorie der Halbbildung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1972), 100–101.

¹⁰¹ Neave, *The Evaluative State*, 20–21.

It is only very recently, in 2020, that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (*Resolution 2352*) returns to the subject of the market/AF relationship, under the impetus of the double crisis caused by Covid and the illiberal drifts of certain European democracies. The concerns that animated *Magna Charta* about the distorting influence that economic and commercial interests have on the conception of 'education' and 'knowledge' seem to be returning:

The Assembly expresses concern over the increasing external funding and *modification of higher education*, which undermine the idea of higher education as a public good and a public responsibility. *The commercial and political interests of external funders may subvert the focus of research* towards increased profits and revenue flows for the companies that sponsor such research, and set limits to the freedom to publish the research results.¹⁰²

But the document does not only denounce an impoverishment of the "quality of education and research".¹⁰³ Prioritising economic aims also has the effect of distorting the university's public responsibility itself: when this is understood in terms of profit, as merely an answer to market or career needs, the function of the university distances "higher education from wider *civic, democratic and societal purposes*".¹⁰⁴ Yet if on the one hand the document seems to return in a critical way to the dangerous pressure of the market (that it speaks of 'public responsibility' instead of 'social responsibility' is significant here), on the other hand the classic format of public management, the practice *par excellence* of neoliberal public policies, with all the accompanying corporate ideology tools (stakeholders, benchmarks, quality assurance, etc.) is nevertheless reaffirmed, or indeed reinforced: the format remained unchanged.

However, is it really possible today to reflect on the properly democratic function of the university, capable of protecting the AF from the attacks of 'illiberal democracies', while turning a blind eye to the drifts of neoliberal post-democracies – that is, to the transformations that have affected our societies over the last half-century?¹⁰⁵ In order to contribute to ideas for the

¹⁰² Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, *Resolution 2352 on Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy* (2020), par. 6.

¹⁰³ Ibid. par. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ The most blatant case of repression of AF in the EU is the closure of the Central European University in Hungary on bureaucratic pretexts. However, it is useful to avoid isolating this particular case, however regrettable, from the more general attacks on academic freedom both in Hungary and in other European countries (cf. Céline Cantat et al., "Authoritarian and Neoliberal Attacks on Higher Education in Hungary", *Radical Philosophy*, 2021, 55–64).

future, a genealogical effort is in this sense indispensable. It requires refocusing on the transformations of the relationships between government, higher education, society and economic forces, that lay at the heart of the concerns of the *Magna Charta*, but in relation to which it has proved ineffective. We shall do so in the following by proposing some cues and reflections of a philosophical nature.

Towards the 'Academic Difference'

"Where are we when we think?" asks Peter Sloterdijk, taking up Hannah Arendt's *Life of the Mind*.¹⁰⁶ No GPS can help us: being that thinks by profession (i.e., any intellectual profession) has for centuries had its 'elsewhere' – not one among many – in the academy.¹⁰⁷

It was a great intuition of Plato to give the ecstatic dimension of thinking an appropriate space. "The original Academy is nothing other than a space-creating innovation: it represents a new and unprecedented institution"¹⁰⁸ and the prototype of all academic institutions to come, characterised by the "academic difference",¹⁰⁹ a *sub specie architecturae* realisation of what centuries later will be – says Sloterdijk – the Husserlian *epoché*: "a house for the deactivation of the world and for the bracketing of concerns, a silo for those enigmatic guests we call ideas and theorems. In today's terms, it should be called a retreat or place for retreat."¹¹⁰ Using the often-referenced expression, it could be said to be a place of 'freedom and isolation'. But what exactly do retreat and isolation mean in this context?

Except for monastic separation, this position of detachment that finds its chosen form in spatial isolation has always been a target for those who place themselves on the side of responsibility and realism. In modernity what embodies this detachment, and the object of blame, is the stereotype of the beautiful romantic soul: its aristocratic posture, its withdrawal from reality and its freedom which is commonly described as a negative, abstract freedom, aimed only at dissolving reality. In post-modernity – after political upheavals that profoundly changed the framework of advanced democracies to the point of anticipating a *real crisis of democracy*, a "deficit in governability" for "excess

¹⁰⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *Scheintod im Denken. Von Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Übung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2010), 52.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 53.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 56.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 58.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 56.

of democracy”¹¹¹ – this accusation is directed towards ‘critical’ and ‘value-oriented’ intellectuals. Figures devoid of any direct responsibility in practical matters and concrete political objectives, lingering on romantic-aristocratic positions of detachment from the world, animated by a negative idea of freedom as opposition, shirking the constraints imposed by reality, they “often devote themselves to the derogation of leadership, the challenging of authority and the unmasking and delegitimation of established institutions”.¹¹² The technological changes of information society, it is assumed, do not play in their favour: with new knowledge policies adapted to these changes, these intellectuals will almost naturally end up in residual positions. To the benefit of governability, they will be replaced by a new generation of “technocratic and policy oriented intellectuals”,¹¹³ with a different conception of freedom as a positive variation of a ‘freedom of’: freedom to undertake, access and use knowledge for purposes outside of knowledge itself, that is, grey matter useful for the growth of the knowledge economy (and society). The others will only have to nostalgically regret an old humanist idea of education and the university as “an aloof ivory-tower, the repository of irrelevant, even if respected wisdom”.¹¹⁴

It can be noted that this accusation of irrelevance – the “romanticism of losers”¹¹⁵ – is never detached from a sense of threat. This entanglement can be understood if we return to the singular position of the academy as Sloterdijk describes it following Foucault: “with the establishment of the academy in the city we have a ‘heterotopia’. This word designates a circumscribed place, which, although it fits into the normal and ‘orthotopic’ area of the *polis*, is nevertheless subject to its own rules, which are often incomprehensible to the city, or even *disturbing*”.¹¹⁶ This ‘other’ place, however, also exist concretely: it is a place that is a “counter-place”, in that it represents and at the same time cancels – by bringing them to a standstill or subverting them – the dynamics that preside over the functioning of the concrete space within which it is located. We are not in the presence of a utopian elsewhere, a place that is

¹¹¹ Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy. Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 173. Cf. Valeria Pinto, “La parte di Tersite. Verità e democrazia dopo la democrazia”, *ISPF-LAB*, 17/9 (2019).

¹¹² Crozier et al., *The Crisis*, p. 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 10.

¹¹⁵ Sloterdijk, *Scheintod*, 76.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 57.

imagined but does not exist, but of a place that is truly accessible to anyone who meets the admission requirements: a place – institutional and with recognised authority – that within its walls *suspends* the common rules of the city and the market. The ‘difference’, the being elsewhere, here is by no means an impotent abstraction, but a disidentification with respect to the “established partition”,¹¹⁷ a “determined negation”¹¹⁸ – which corresponds to the very heart of democracy, to its soul that is by definition critical.

In this light it is relevant, then, that a similar and complementary concept of ‘difference’ was also elaborated, as early as the 1950s, by classical Critical Theory. Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno also have reflected on the need to definitively overcome the opposition between “inside” and “outside”¹¹⁹ that traditionally defines the dimension of *Bildung*. In mass society, “no individual can be formed as an isolated entity”: “one of the cultural causes of the crisis of *Bildung* (*Bildungskrise*) lies precisely in holding fast to a concept referring to the isolated self, in the idolatry of the self-sufficient self [...]”.¹²⁰ Opposing this, Horkheimer and Adorno insist on the “internal connection” between university and society¹²¹ – a connection in which one must be aware of how education needs its own time and space that are independent from and not subordinated to moments of socialisation. Not unlike Sloterdijk, they are here imagining a “connection” through “difference”.

This is not a paradox: according to Horkheimer, such a “connection” was already present in the tradition of *Bildung*. Goethe is the first to realise how “the path of education” (*Weg der Bildung*) is indeed a path of isolation but always “in *dedication to something*”: if “it is not connected with a life that wants something in and from the world, it remains empty and blind”.¹²² *Bildung* thus starts from the ~~connection~~ between isolation and connection, which is also essential to the dimension of freedom:

¹¹⁷ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

¹¹⁸ Cf. Samir Gandesha, “‘A Period of Enormous Opportunity’: The Crisis of ‘Critique’”, 20 December 2019: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/a-period-of-enormous-opportunity-the-crisis-of-critique/>.

¹¹⁹ Max Horkheimer, “Begriff der Bildung” in *Gesammelte Schriften* 8 (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1985), 409–419, 411.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 415.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

No-one is educated, who does not in devotion to their own activity, recognize the connection it has to the whole, and who does not apply the same freedom from slogans, clichés and prejudices, that one must acquire in one's exercise of the academic profession, against the spirit of the times, even in public affairs.¹²³

If Sloterdijk, through Foucault, defines the question of freedom on the basis of a spatial determination, classical Critical Theory – as these passages from Horkheimer reveal – shifts the emphasis to the *relationship* between isolation and the public dimension. Freedom – which for classical Critical Theory is first and foremost a “social fact”¹²⁴ – must be defined not as a spatial but as a relational question. But what does such a relationship look like that would protect freedom?

Horkheimer seems have left this question unanswered, but Adorno, in his *Theorie der Halbbildung* of 1959, brings it back to its dialectical essence. Education has a ‘double character’, he writes, and always involves two extremes.¹²⁵ On the one hand, there is the *aspiration* towards autonomy, towards a ‘sovereignty of spirit’ completely removed from external ties or interests. This promise of self-sufficiency, which cannot be disregarded, nevertheless runs the risk of “obscuring the connection between ideas and their realisation”¹²⁶, to the point of making the latter a taboo: instead of taking it shape from praxis, education develops as its antithesis.¹²⁷ Adorno calls it the ‘*spiritualisation* of *Kultur*’ (*Vergeistigung der Kultur*), in which “its impotence is already virtually confirmed”.¹²⁸ If, however – at the other extreme – the meaning of *Bildung* is instead understood from the “praxis of human things”, the risk is that of remaining bound to “a completely administered context”, in which education itself is understood only “as administration”,¹²⁹ an education aimed at “socially useful purposes” (Adorno defines this as “*adjustment*” [*Anpassung*], or “*Halbbildung*” – the “mutation of all cultural content into consumer goods”¹³⁰). Whether one prefers one over the other, reduced to “adjustment” or “spiritualisation”, education is completely emptied of its meaning, including the dimension of freedom or autonomy that belongs to it:

¹²³ Ibid. 416

¹²⁴ Adorno, *Halbbildung*, 121.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 94.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Adorno, *Halbbildung*, 95. cf. also *Erziehung nach Auschwitz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1977), 676.

¹³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung zur "Theorie der Halbbildung"* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1972) 576. On the concept of “adjustment” see also Adorno, *Halbbildung*, 95.

If the *force-field* that is called *Bildung* becomes hardened into fixed categories, be they spirit or nature, sovereignty or adaptation, each of these isolated categories comes to contradict its own meaning and lends itself to ideology, encourages regression.¹³¹

How to protect freedom between these two extremes? The image of the ‘force-field’ (*Kraftfeld*) – often also used by Adorno to define his own dialectical philosophy¹³² – suggests that there is no solution at all: there is no formation that is not determined or mediated by social praxis, nor would the latter be possible without that splitting and isolation of knowledge that allows understanding (it would be a set of “relations that blindly subsist and blindly move”¹³³). In the “force-field” that defines the relationship between university and society, no unilateral solution is possible: “freedom” itself is by no means a balance between the two dimensions, but rather a barrier of continuous transit between social constraint and independence. It is defined in the *relationship* between these extremes, while philosophy is the *method* by which this is performed.

Conclusion

Reimagining AF in the complex relationship between university and society therefore, first of all, means establishing a *method*. As Adorno writes: “I think that the most important thing to do [...] is precisely to counter the blind arrogance of each collectivity, to increase *resistance* to it, *adequately highlighting* the problem connected to the process of collectivisation”.¹³⁴ The “academic difference” here takes the form of an exercise in “resistance” (*Widerstand*) and critical reflection, which for Adorno represents the only method for defining the relationship between university and society, without resolving it in unilateral solutions:

When [the spirit] (*Geist*) makes the claim of self-sublimation, one must challenge it by reminding it of its dependence on the relations of real life and its inseparability from their conformation, and finally of its natural origin. But if spirit is simply reduced to that dependence and adapts itself to the role of pure medium on its own, one must remind it of the opposite: that spirit is separated from the real relations of life and has become autonomous in relation to them is not only its falsehood, but also its truth; no stringent knowledge, no successful work of art could be refuted with the argument of its social genesis.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Adorno, *Halbbildung*, 96.

¹³² Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Der Essay als Form* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1974), 22.

¹³³ Adorno, *Halbbildung*, 94.

¹³⁴ Adorno, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, 681.

This *method* poses the problem of AF at a different level in relation to an exclusively instrumental (operational) use of the concept, useful for evidence-based policy making. This retrieves a broader and more complex dimension of the problem: a *political dimension*, that today appears overshadowed by the predominance of criteria of performativity and functionalization, and by a series of artificial dichotomies to which such criteria lead: 'internal' and 'external', 'ivory tower' and 'society', 'education' and 'competence', 'useless' and 'useful'. To define this 'dimension' of AF, we need an exercise of the 'imagination' that is more extensive, capable of unhinging every binary simplification and creating again a space for critical discussion and a political *method* that not only comprises the interaction between university, society and the market, but also protects and respects the 'academic difference' as a measure of an independent and truly democratic space.

Postscript

This text was in its entirety planned, written and approved by both authors. This has not meant a division of labour, but a true collaboration along the entire work. However, the Italian evaluation practice requires that in competition procedures the "individual contribution in collaborative work" is always made explicit (DM 76/2012). For this purpose only, the odd-numbered paragraphs should be attributed to Susanna Zellini and the even-numbered paragraphs to Valeria Pinto, with the exception of the last two paragraphs, that should be attributed to both authors. In reality, however, this article has no scientific value in Italy. In fact, since its inception The National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research has, despite many well-founded criticisms, established a classification of journals by scientific-disciplinary sectors, distinguishing between journals that are simply 'scientific' and 'class A journals' (articles published in the latter may have been recognised as having a value many times higher than the others). At the moment of writing, Philosophy and theory in higher education, despite its international prestige, does not even appear in the list of scientific journals. We are nevertheless happy to have exercised our academic freedom despite and against these extrinsic constraints.

¹³⁵ Adorno, *Halbbildung*, 121.

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