Universities in the Bologna Process: Between Novel Economization and Politicization

Wolfgang Nitsch, 2004
In which large societal and contemporary transformation contexts should we reflect upon and analyze the so-called “Bologna Process” regarding the restructuring of the university system in Europe? I suggest viewing it as the interplay of a new and/or extended economization and systematical politicization of the university realm.

It is obvious that universities in today’s modern capitalistic society are under a constant pressure to economize, and also have become objects of intensive political battles and conflicts. But what we have also been able to observe over the last ten to fifteen years is that the university realm, as part of the transformation process taking place in the midst of a privatizing and globalized capitalism, is being further economized with a new quality and intensity, and with new methods and forms. At the same time, and in other ways, it is being politicized externally and from above. Previously, the objective appearance prevailed of a state-supported societal form characterized by the east-west conflict, one of an especially academic institutional sphere for the most part separated from the state and other societal realms. This manifested itself most of all by the institutional guarantee of a freedom of teaching and learning, i.e. an academic kind of self-administration where the partners operated within an alliance system broadly directed by the state. Since then, the university realm has seen new forms of a deeper penetration of new, stronger instruments of economization as well as politicization. These in turn complement one another, whereas in the past they mostly worked against one another. Structural transformation pressure from the current formation of the capitalistic economy partially works itself directly into the university arena and looks for political forms of expression. At the same time, a new political transformation functionary fraction has emerged that has made a career out of this new economization pressure, and, especially in a post-fascist and post-socialist national state such as Germany, attempts to achieve additional power and system-changing goals that serve their interests (seen as a “passive revolution” from above in the spirit of Gramscis). In other words: the dismantling of the hard-earned democratic forms of control and voting rights in councils, companies, schools and universities, and the re-implementation of dictatorial conditions.

The interaction of specific economization and politicization forms is made clear when we note the differences of each individual level in a two-dimensional realm:

The economization dimension features the macro-, meso-, and micro-economic levels as well as the realm of the diffuse symbolic economization of mentalities or “governmentalities” (Foucault):

- The university increasingly is influenced by the macroeconomic processes of the re-location of investment into focal points of the globalized competition found in the large multinational concerns and a corresponding instrumentalization of national economic and technological policy.
On the meso-economic level, a national and European artificial system of competition is to be established for the university realm, and formed by semi-private corporate organizations such as the Bertelsmann Foundation.

On the micro-economic level, the individual universities, their departments, and individual teams of researchers and department heads are to be redefined as a kind of companies or entrepreneurial units that are to be commanded by management personalities. Their decisions are to take higher priority over those of university staff and students, who are then to assume the role of contracted “workers” or “apprentices” (and who are to take on more and more of the costs of studying, i.e. through student fees, advertising revenues, and efforts to acquire funding from outside parties (for which they are not paid)).

With the political dimension, we also see forms and qualities of politicization on the upper, middle, and lower level as well as general tendencies towards politicization:

- Controls from top to bottom, especially the “activation” of output goals (determined from above) for the individualized students and staff who have fewer and fewer rights.

- Political conflict on the intermediate level between the various academic “companies” regarding the distribution and oligopolization of income sources and benefits in a not-free, not-transparent, forced competition system.

- Downstream, highly variable politicization processes can also be found on the lower level. Namely, the dependent, precarious students find themselves amidst political struggles (some of which can be gender or ethnically-based) with staff regarding the distribution of funding and resources, and/or engage in micro-political protest (by means of informal organizations, absenteeism, and academic work “under the table”).

All of these forms of politicization are characterized by anything from a post-constitutional authority that continues to implement itself, all the way to an arbitrary form of politics and management. And this is done either directly, indirectly, intentionally, or unintentionally. It has less and less to do with a rational political debate on the formation of constitutional and human rights guarantees in democratic processes, and more to do with the indiscriminate “creation” of measures that form and control human resources in an arena of “the survival of the fittest,” against whom the weaker must similarly practice methods of self-defense and survival. To be certain, the epochs of capitalist societal formation that were characterized by parliamentary-democratic forms of government were also dominated by these conditions of selection and power. However, the democratic and constitutional institutions and norms as well as university self-administration were still able to function as an objective instrument of contra-factionistic anticipation of societal and/or possible objective democratization.

If we observe the interweaving of these specific forms and qualities of economization and politicization in the university realm, the tendency becomes clear that now more than ever, the capitalism supported and driven by the state is exactly where the separation between economy and politics begins to disintegrate. This was similar to what was seen, particularly radically, in another historical constellation, the Third Reich. Especially in new realms of authoritarian-led public university “corporations” that are free of democracy and government, politicization from above, and external and internal economization are unlikely to be separated from one another. Here, the democracy-free zone of economic corporate power is transferred to the central realm of cooperation between state and society, parliament, gov-
ernment, and university self-administration. A kind of inconspicuous coup d'etat occurs that equips an ancillary government with extensive access to tax monies, with which it is free to do what it wants without having to answer to democratic processes, and under extremely weak parliamentary control. Furthermore, this is done in close personal contact with “personalities” from companies, banks, and conglomerates. And important here is that this is anything but a de-politicization, i.e. a focused commercialization of universities into “non-political” private and family companies, but rather an authoritarian political economic form: A corporate organizational model with extensive worker participation or cooperative structures composed of students and professors has not been established here. Instead, a particularly authoritative corporate structure is being introduced that facilitates the power of companies, large banks, and the governmental departments associated with them that are to ensure that universities concentrate on topics of “core interest” for companies, i.e. knowledge and human resources that are directly exploitable for industry. With this being the case, the tendency would be for an array of university functions and roles to be largely neglected and subtly liquidated:

- Sufficient research and education for societal realms other than those considered “acceptable” by the hegemonic industry (this includes the highly commercialized cultural and media realms),
- The use of universities as a moratorium for youth to receive a corresponding preparatory training, or a continued higher general education with indirect relevance for the development of social and professional identities; this would include programs meant to help students with poor or precarious employment prospects,
- The possible development of non-conforming, risk-taking, and provoking educational and cognitive processes and aesthetic praxes on the periphery of conventional disciplines and professions,
- Basic, open-ended research and cultural development that is only possible with long-term state assistance and investment. This would also be true for a corresponding education and socialization in the sciences and/or arts as a lifelong profession.

These traditional university realms are in no way revolutionary or anti-establishment. Instead, they are forums for intellectual progress and cultural development that have been achieved by the middle class. In many cases (and not just in these alone), they have and could continue to have a high degree of utilization for capitalistic purposes as innovative spheres of insight. This poses the frightening question of whether we will return to a crisis epoch as seen in the 1930s and 1940s that was characterized by a self-destructive, rebarbarization and cannibalization of capitalistic strata of leadership that (once again) eat their own cultural capital for the future: the educated youth. This applies not only to German society, but here it is particularly critical, as the extensive moral self destruction of its working-class educated population (and with it, the closely-connected destruction or extermination of its Jewish educated population) has still not been fully dealt with. In the meantime, we can observe German racism shifting inwardly, virtually expanding in the middle class as a kind of internal social Darwinism that can be seen in the particularly obsessive performance-based selection in the German apartheid school system.

As opposed to many western societies, the German middle and upper class hardly have any well-developed, firmly-established (partially) private elite university realms and their corre-
sponding extensive donation capital, intensive patronage, as well as traditional state subventions that could fend off or balance out the current economization offensive in the university realm. Higher education, culture, and science were almost always the exclusive domain of the upper class “cultural authorities,” and, in more modern times, the responsibility of the democratic social state as part of a program to expand the relative cultural and educational horizon of its citizens. Parallel to this deregulation, cutting back, and greater concentration on direct economic support, no real, relatively autonomous economic basis exists for elite institutions that are (as an alternative) supported by funding from German upper-middle and upper classes, or patronage from companies.

Under these circumstances, where and how can counter-strategies be developed in Germany against this dominant university policy?

For these, we need to clarify two problems:

It should be well investigated whether system-intrinsic, continually occurring, or new contradictions exist that provoke forms of political contradiction which extend beyond the boundaries of this societal system.

Additionally, we should check how novel, partial coalitions can be built between groups whose opposition partially emerges from new internal structural contradictions, and who previously had not had contact with groups whose tradition of opposition has resulted from former areas of conflict and crisis.

In terms of the first problem, I see mostly three internal inconsistencies in the current forms and phases of capitalistic economization and politicization of the university realm and sciences, all of which are due to or are the outcome of a fundamental contradiction:

Observe the magnitude of how the latest wave of economic growth is not concerned with the exploitation of raw materials and industrial manpower, but instead with the scientific and cultural creativity of highly-qualified workers whose generally accessible products (as part of a commonwealth economy or "second economy") must be aggressively adopted and monopolized to exploit them as artificially acquired goods: For this, a massive expansion of this level of intellectual and cultural producers must be prevented, as they could claim ownership and collective co-management in the formation and use of this scientific and culturally-based wealth.

(1) The pressure towards standards of complete utilization and a total commodification and subsumption of all remaining realms of the second economy and/or moral economy as a capital utilization hits home as it endangers the forms of (counterbalancing) relational and emotional work that are necessary for intensive labor consolidation. Without this counterbalance, a large portion of the motivation for a top effort among students and/or professional men and women would fall apart. The tradition of labor distribution and the balance of economic and cultural education and professionalism among the middle class ultimately feeds off of this contradiction. As long as this middle class inheritance is still in its most caustic existence, there will always be public forms of protest against the capitalistic system that threatens the (not yet completely) commodified educational and cultural practices of its middle class. Capitalism could, in a way based upon totalitarian power structures, continue to exist for a time without this semi-independent middle class, but they are not be able to con-
tinue in the meantime without it, and would ultimately have to represent their specific interests politically.

(2) Due to the capitalistic pressure to make the most of the generated information and communication technology revolution, some of its political-economic forms become fragile or endangered: A few strategically central forms and allocation of knowledge would not be able to be completely controlled and appropriated by the large capitalistic concerns due to the technical structure of this information. Instead, it would have to at least be partially made accessible within an intellectual and cultural ‘Commons’ (Allmende) as an ensemble of novel kinds of public goods. Fresh resistance will continually come from those interested in a free exchange and cooperation of information against the artificially imposed barriers to acquisition and access—which themselves actually hinder system-critical possibilities for innovation. This resistance can extend all the way to the development of informal or formal associations and/or forms of civil disobedience against the dominating tendency towards innovative use values.

(3) The economic and political power elites respond to workers (who are more scientifically and culturally educated) within an increasingly knowledge-based economy with a massive wage and income reduction offensive, along with an artificial devaluation of the increasingly intensive and substantial educational services from teachers, students, and those currently in apprenticeships. They would receive no compensation for these services (e.g. through special state funding), but instead would have to pay arbitrary mandatory fees as a kind of “special payment” (a new form of politics-for-sale). As these arbitrary fees would in no way serve to fund programs to help unemployed or needy people, this is yet another form of the re-distribution of funds in favor of the well-to-do classes of society and the large and multinational companies (who are nearly exempt from paying taxes). This artificial and repressive re-defining of the factual and potentially intellectually and culturally productive students into passive consumers of knowledge that is transferred by privileged scientific firms contradicts all information and knowledge of advanced learning psychology and pedagogics. These are exactly the fields that aim to develop the self-constructive efforts of students and pupils: This kind of schizophrenic constellation will continually offer fruitful ground and occasion for protest.

These contradictory tendencies are not based upon fixable ideological misunderstandings on the part of political and economic arenas of power, but are more so perpetuated by structures inside the capitalistic world system, and would be anything but simple to remove from these power structures. At the same time, programs and models for a possible removal of these contradictions must be perpetually developed, and, in certain areas, executed and attempted. Only through this would the transition to post-capitalist economic structures and/or the framework for a worldwide limit to capitalistic forms of business seem generally achievable.

From the various protest and alternative movements arising from the above-mentioned three zones of contradiction, connections can be made from which limited coalitions and campaigns could arise. The common as well as the differing primary interests and existential problems of the various groups should be regarded: groups having a varying socio-economic status (based upon traditional criteria) can be found here:

The first group is comprised of the (still) relatively privileged professional middle class. Protest against system structures arise from their situation of psycho-social pressure.
The second group can use (at least partially and cyclically) vacuum spaces in power and acquisition systems for their innovative cooperation. From this, a social feeling of self-esteem can arise, resulting in the development of forms of creative sub-political resistance.

The third group, which is the increasingly exploited and irregularly or precariously employed class of young intellectuals, needs support by means of reform-oriented and opposition groups the most. These should come from the privileged fractions of professionals and politicians, with whom they can attempt to protect themselves from further decreases in income, more fees, and precarious forms of employment. This is particularly true of groups such as younger people making the transition from apprenticeships into the unsecured working world; they are dependent upon the support of organizations to look out for their interests, e.g. in establishing cooperative associations. Only in such informal networks of solidarity and through upholding and supporting their political activity can their problems of existence be addressed.

Coalitions between these variously situated groups in the university realm and in the corresponding fields of employment can be strengthened by their using the already-existing/developing alternative organizational structures in the university: From this, a coalition of non-governmental organizations of the so-called “third sector” is possible, in which unions, parishes, and parties within the partitions of the university system could promote and attempt other forms of self-administration or special universities in cooperation with societal stakeholders and with strengthened participation by students and educational partakers. This would divert from the new authoritative centralistic university management regime that has first and foremost been developed for business-relevant topics of study, and which only irrationally gives attention to cultural and educational majors and professions.

In the development of university fields of study, the modularization and securing of quality, accreditation, and the room to operate allowed for in the Bologna Agreement permits alternatives and plurality to be used. Here, certain university and professional fields that directly follow and support one another as well as somewhat longer BA/MA courses of study (these are the same as the former Diplom and Magister tracks of study) can be supported and partially implemented, while in other tracks of study and professions, various alternative types of BA and MA courses of study could be supported and tried out: interdisciplinary scientific general education; pragmatically-based courses of study; and special branches of science-oriented courses of study, for which various types, experiences, and institutions of evaluation, quality control, and accreditation would come into play.

Overall, it must be made better known, and efforts should be made in the political realm, towards the fact that homogenized centralistic models of study and administration for the entire university realm should be avoided. Additionally, the entire field of tertiary and research-related education should be recognized as a pluralistic field of heterogenous interests and forms of organization. Not a territorial, regional university federation with a homogeneous, authoritarian controlled, “big industry” federal university system, but instead one that is differentiated among fields of activity and faculties/majors, and one having an interregional university federalism would do justice to the factual de-territorial and virtual interconnected research and groups of professionals and the young, mobile students and intelligentsia.

For the next medium-term span of time, appropriate coalitions would therefore be responsible for the development of various “economies” or political-economic spheres of socialization in the university realm that would gradually be created on all levels, both politically and
institutionally, and which would all be transparent and easy to differentiate: from the admissions process, to the structure of majors; self-administration and management forms; the participation of social groups; the forms of study and research; the status of students and researchers; all the way to the processes for university reform, evaluation, and quality control.

If it is possible to legally institutionalize a complex system of power distribution and checks and balances (having both real and contra-factual idealistic effects) in capitalistic societal forms among many nations (even if they do have setbacks and interruptions), then this should also be possible in the (equally highly sensitive and complex) field of higher education and scientific institutions. Unfortunately, a decline into pre-constitutional, lawless forms of power can currently be observed, as was the case until the 1950s, that still display an institutional execution of power (similar to pre-constitutional manor law) in the state schools—but not at the universities.

An analogy (albeit somewhat lopsided) with the three branches of government (legislative, judicial, and executive) allows us to differentiate between zones of influence of three different legal spheres in the university and scientific realm.

- The zone of “free” enterprise (the first economy) that is institutionalized in capitalistic societies (and therefore mostly concentrated in large and/or multinational oligopolies) and its need for direct realization of education, science, and culture.

- The zone of (more or less) institutionalized commonwealth and welfare (the second economy, the polis, the common land, general welfare services, human rights, and environmentalism), and the need for a corresponding education, knowledge, science, and culture.

- The zone that, to this point, has been (in all societal formations) weakly institutionalized: the “uncertain” or “Socratic” education, culture, and science for the sake of education, culture, and science. This is by no means non-political, but is part of neither the first nor second economy, and is instead an economic and political non-possibility as defined by Derrida, and/or similar to the complex selection and independent existence of the judiciary within a constitutionally bound democracy.

Just like the public university system, modern democracy serves all three of these legally protected spheres in capitalistic societies and their corresponding power structures (with highly varying emphasis). For this, democracy has created separate legal departments and legal materials. It would only be effective if it would represent itself in a cooperative dialogue that distributes labor and responsibilities effectively among the university realm, i.e. between three faculty arenas that would also have partially separate self-administration and management forms, as well as processes for evaluation, quality control, policy and/or controlling and accreditation. Today however all the functions are commanded by the university leadership, just like legal offices, departments of justice, lawmakers, and the courts of justice were under the control of a single president. But even without a new faculty organization (that is difficult to implement), the possibility for the following would still be easy to envision: internal and interregional university forums, conferences, and coalitions for these three university realms; or even partially separate university reform, evaluation, quality control and accreditation procedures; not to mention corresponding separate agencies and perhaps even separate paths of study and certifications within the traditional majors. It’s not difficult to see why e.g. a uni-
versity (or, should we say, “University, Inc.”) with a program negotiated by large companies, and subsidized by the state for its education, research and development, needs to make quick decisions because it is possibly under international competitive pressure, and for this would have to have a “tightly wound leadership structure.” But why would this have to be the model for entirely different realms of study and research where quality is dependent upon a decentralized-egalitarian cooperation, discourse, and exchange of dialogue of groups having various statuses and professions (mostly from, but not limited to the cultural, social service, and therapy sciences)?

Future laws and constitutional policy for the university realm should be in a position to make possible various self-administration, management and governance models and various participatory models (or non-participatory models) of diverse civil-societal groups and state and communal organs and/or departments among the three (or similarly differentiated) spheres of policy in the university and scientific field. As is generally known, judges, lawyers, departments of justice, departments of investigation, and the penal system are structured along various and differing organizational models. Individual university majors, student departments, those doing continued education, faculties, and universities could, under the current legal conditions, create new forms of organization or informal panels and procedures that would go in this direction (see W.Nitsch, Runde Tische an Hochschulen. Neue Beteiligungsformen im Wissenschaftsbereich, Frankfurt/M. 1991).

This kind of systematic legal, economic, and political institutional differentiation (which certainly would not be easy to implement) in the public and partially privatized university realm, which has already partially begun (although relatively intransparently), would expose the far-reaching conflicts of interests and contradicting logical principals that rival one another, and would hold the responsible parties more accountable. (A partially comparable differentiation process has developed in the parliamentary realm, where members of parliament – for example members of congress in the USA – have to disclose whether they serve certain companies and organizations or serve as party functionaries or serve simply on their remuneration. In other words, whether they live (as described by Max Weber) “for or from the politics”.

There are certainly reasonable objections from opposing parties against this kind of thinking and viewpoint: Whether it’s because the total economization of the university realm under the command of a homogenous New Public Management model is considered unavoidable, or because hope is still placed in the contra-factual principle of a homogenous public corporatism in universities. Or even perhaps because the non-transparency and chaos of the current processes of the hidden or unofficial privatization of the university are interpreted as a system functionality (see e.g. Christine Schwarz, Evaluation als modernes Ritual, forthcoming, 2005). But even a downright experimental “forum theatre” with allocated “roles for the experts” as part of a (partially) symbolic-political and decorative “showcase” of evaluation and quality management processes would unearth this triangular view of the university battlefield between the two/three economies and/or anti-economies and still reveal interesting findings and insights.

Contact:
Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Nitsch, Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, D 26111 Oldenburg
wolfgang.nitsch@uni-oldenburg.de