

Introduction.

The ideal of *Bildung* and the project of a learning society

Are our societies becoming *learning societies*? Or shall they? Or should they? Under which conditions would it be possible? And, first of all, what does this expression mean?

Evidently, nowadays, the general concept of *learning*, with all its possible combinations – learning society, lifelong learning, learning markets, learning organizations, learning cities, learning nations etc. – has become one of the most widespread and efficient ideological patterns in the current official discourses of public and private actors, for incenting individuals, organizations and institutions to adapt themselves to the rapid evolutions and constant mutations of technologies, markets and work world¹. It offers, indeed, a powerful and flexible legitimizing narrative for social institutions, well fitting with what some sociologists call the “new spirit of capitalism”², by making “lifelong learning” some sort of civic religion in the allegedly emerging learning society³.

While the phrase “knowledge economy” is supposed to be an analytical concept describing the global shift of the economy from an industrial mode of

production to a mode of production increasingly based on immaterial goods, new technologies of information and communication, knowledge, services and innovation⁴, the related notion of “learning society” is mainly presented as a *normative model* of what societies *should* be and become, even as a utopian project designed for transforming the social functions of learning in order to face the multiple challenges of this new era of the world economy⁵. In this respect, the “learning society” could be considered as a global paradigm and narrative for the twenty-first century Western political and educational thought, in a similar way to what the ideal of *Bildung* was for the eighteenth century, especially in German-speaking countries⁶.

From a historical point of view, *Bildung* and “learning society” certainly refer to very distinct moments in time, which can be situated by identifying one of their respective most symbolic texts. In 1809/10, Wilhelm von Humboldt was elaborating his plan of foundation and organization of the new University of Berlin. This text is one of the culminating points of a vivid debate in classical German philosophy around the Idea of university as an institution devoted producing science for promoting the ideal of *Bildung*, i.e. the personal and collective integral self-cultivation and self-education of human beings⁷. Two centuries later, in 1995, the European

Commission published a White paper entitled “*Towards the Learning Society*”, calling all social actors to learn in a “lifelong and lifewide” manner, thereby opening the way to the so-called Strategy of Lisbon, which lays the foundations for a European knowledge economy, and consequently to the Bologna Process, which aims to reform the European higher education area by putting universities at the center of a “Europe of Knowledge”⁸.

But, however different these two texts may appear, they somehow imply analogous projects: both aim to reform the Idea of university and the normative model of higher education on the basis of a fully renewed political-educational paradigm. Such an analogy would be of pure historical interest if it were not used so widely – explicitly or implicitly – in the current discourses on the mutations of university. Indeed, in spite of the historical and cultural distance, in the last decades reference is made again and again to the figure of Humboldt and to this “Berlin moment” in academic literature, across the disciplines, whether positively or negatively, as the counter-model of the Bologna model, and more generally of the academic model induced by the Knowledge Economy: “Joyful Good-bye to Humboldt”, “Le cauchemar de Humboldt”, “Humboldt meets Bologna”, “Humboldt International”, etc.⁹

This “spectral” presence of Humboldt and the persistent power of attraction of his model of university is a cultural fact of our time¹⁰. This model, providing a kind of synthesis of the German philosophy of *Bildung* in, at least, four normative principles – freedom and independence of the scholar (*Freiheit und Einsamkeit*), institutional autonomy of university, unity of research and teaching, cultural mission of science (*Bildung durch Wissenschaft*)¹¹ – has been exported worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth century¹², and is still fully recognizable in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* of 1988. Although this Humboldtian genealogy may be partly “mythological”¹³, it is still an efficient shared narrative¹⁴. Now, the Humboldtian narrative is conflicting with the dominant narrative of the knowledge economy, especially in Europe since the Bologna reforms, but also in North America. Thus the analogy between the two models is the nexus of profound normative and conceptual tensions between alternative conceptions and attitudes: entrepreneurial university *vs.* “ivory tower”, managerial turn *vs.* philosophical tradition, economic adaptation *vs.* cultural resistance. In this context, the Humboldtian analogy may be used to criticize and refuse the reforms, or on the contrary to justify them, by showing how obsolete the old model has supposedly become.