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The claims in the frontier

University (in) the space of Frontier

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, authored an essay: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," that ranks among the most influential arguments ever made regarding American history. The frontier, as Turner underlines in the 1893 text, creates freedom by breaking the limits of habit, offering new experiences, promoting new institutions and activating the spirit of community (Turner, 2010).

The university as a frontier is anything but a universe closed in on itself, since it is deeply embedded in the territory and its networks, in the spirit of a full collaboration without subordination. It is the social space where to weave relationships with institutions, organisations, businesses and families, in collaboration with other universities, starting with neighbouring ones, making the most of every innovative and creative potential. What are the grounding features of the University?

– an intellectual and spiritual community,
– a knowledge that benefits from the value of dialogue and intermediation in order to problematise and produce conceptual, methodological and investigative proposals,
– a common desire to reflect on various aspects of life and reality: nature, anthropology, ethics, politics,
– aside from being a place of apprenticeship, it is a place where one is taught to think, to exercise a responsible, critical, scientific judgment,
– it is a community oriented towards solidarity and service: its universal scope does not make it neglect attention to the context in which it is settled, because this attention to the local reality determines the credibility of its wider service.

Thanks to the vast range of knowledge it cultivates, university is the only social institution capable of rapidly combining its skills in effective ways to address the many transdisciplinary questions that contemporaneity presents and to explore new practices. In line with the provisions of the national Constitutions, university is free and oriented towards the advancement of knowledge, which translates, first of all, into the protection of the time needed for research. The genius of this European model exported all over the world and to which Wilhelm von Humboldt contributed, lies precisely in these two characteristics: its ability to adapt to the new and the totality to which each University gives a voice. The complexity of a mosaic of ideas requires

not simply a management but a leadership and a governance that recognise how to preserve long-lived intellectual and educational traditions. Leadership and governance aimed at putting teaching and research at the center and at reconstructing new community bonds, a governance approach based on listening, on collegiality, in the certainty that only by guaranteeing diversity of thought in decision-making, can be created inclusive processes.

The more general claim of a defined social role, in corporative terms, for knowledge professionals, is the affirmation of a cultural identity and shared operational practices that the academic community cannot receive from the outside, at the obvious risk of becoming an instrument of extraneous interest (bowing to company mindset: incentive, production, competitiveness), or even worse, of breaking up into strict disciplinary enclaves each seeking support to participate in the governance, thus transforming the institution in a battleground for internal oppositions. These phenomena are structurally associated to the functionality of many universities throughout Europe. By considering the university one of the main actors in the production of knowledge and as a transversal subject of connection between codified knowledge – which circulates globally – and the one created locally, one can think of a model of university that aims at an overall development – the developmental university – declined, not only in terms of scientific and technological advancement and innovation, but also in terms of contribution to social welfare, to the sustainability of democracy, to the multicultural understanding.

In recent years, the awareness, of the impact of research on the cultural, social and economic development of the reference communities in the face of the complexity of global challenges, has emerged. In this sense, research that we consider basic (abstract and free) and research that instead presents itself as applied, are both channeled to produce outcomes that can accommodate social changes, for which it is necessary to innovate, introduce new conceptual systems, new regulations, new production methods, new spaces for action. This requires to develop new theories to be translated into practical structures, into adaptive strategies in the awareness of the challenges and performance that the environment-world demands. The constant concern of the governance of any university, at any latitude, is to guarantee both a work environment and a level of funding suitable to allow each scholar to implement his/her commitment in scientific research, in favour of the advancement of knowledge and the contribution to development at the largest scope. In fact, every context should implement the development system that is most appropriate to its specificities. Culturalising the economy means allowing any country to exert suitable techniques, in line with sustainable resources management: the use of resources – tangible and intangible assets- is a cultural strategy. Culturalising means pluralising even the processes of money, and therefore the processes of the economy. University education can create soft skills to produce

political-economic alternatives, through the multi-culturalisation of research approaches, by designing solutions fitting specific contexts (Fornet-Betancourt, 2011).

A designing community

University is a powerful drive for social dimensions considered as periphery, understood at different territorial scales: the global ones, concerning the imbalances between the North and South of the world; national ones, which consider the gap between advanced and weaker regions within a country system; urban ones, which indicate the marginal and/or distressed neighbourhoods of a city. Since one main task of universities is to contrast the different lines of educational poverty, indeed, as active social bodies, they can boost the advancement of the South (s) of the world, in particular by reducing gaps between vibrant metropolises and more peripheral regions, as well by monitoring processes of cultural rebalancing. What are the contributions of university education to the recognition and affirmation of differences and identities? How do local contexts and communities promote education and learning, in their multifaceted relationship with economic, environmental, social, religious, political, cultural and ethical components?

In regard to global peripheries, university can play a leading role in the empowering of emerging country, first and foremost in institutional terms, participating with other stakeholders in processes of innovation in the overall national economic and social transitions. Innovation is a cultural and socio-economic phenomenon: involves community in its whole. It calls for investments, infrastructure, dedicated policies, has a strong design component, can be planned and is the result of specific action strategies. Therefore, university can encourage reflection and awareness when a community has to face the unpredictability of the current reality, marked by global events that have a real impact on daily life. Its inclusive space is the new frontier where to question how education and learning relate to challenging intergenerational claims, to the causes and consequences of migration, to human rights advocacy, to shortage of job, to the advances in health sciences, and to other unexpected events.

We need to reflect on how to formulate convincing strategic hypotheses that are original and suited to the nature of our universities. We need to think about the overall architecture of the training offer, the position that bachelor degrees, master's degrees, research doctorates ought to occupy, and, therefore, the specific objectives we intend to achieve with each competence. Probably, the straight line is not the most adequate representation of such architecture; we have to imagine something more complex, but at the same time clear and easily readable from the outside, which better meets the expectations of students in reference to the social supply and demand. In addition, through government funding aiming at improving the quality of research and internationalisation, university carries on synergy between global knowledge circuit and

any national socio-economic system, becoming a reliable workshop. In this regard, it is interesting to emphasise the gatekeeper role of university researchers, who, by accessing global science and interacting with universities located in other countries, can inject new ideas and implement new strategies within local cultural and productive fabrics. As for regional peripheries, it is useful to investigate to which extent universities – while pursuing the objective of scientific excellence according to international standards – are able to comply with the criticalities inherent in local contexts, often characterised by traditional production sectors or by declining or marginal activities. University can act as a mediator within the regional ecosystem precisely in order to contribute to the change of territorial development trajectories so to overcome the lock-in processes that might affect peripheral regions.

In this direction, universities can: a) be partners in national networks or become local spokes to contribute to territorial governance bridging national and international actors b) contribute to processing policies and procedures establishing partnerships with corporates and public bodies or exploring new sectors of production by promoting transdisciplinary competence c) contribute to a cultural change, understood as the ability to enhance soft skills, training qualified human resources, producing targeted spin-offs.

It is also necessary to question ourselves about the third mission of academic international relations, namely what the United Nations 2030 Agenda refers to as the exercise of the social role of universities around the world. In particular, international cooperation with academic and vocational institutions, as well with production systems within emerging contexts in Asia, Africa, South America, represents an important opportunity to strengthen the role as co-builders of knowledge and not as exporters, contributing to rebalance global and local dimensions, to enhance knowledge and practices in a perspective of international co-development. Therefore, empowerment and capacity building represent, beyond any rhetoric, the winning keys through which to start new connections to qualify the training of local professionals. The focus on international academic relations should foster joining the European Commission's "European Alliance initiative" which promotes and financially supports the concrete implementation of partnerships of excellence. The goal is to create international inter-university campuses that enhance specific identity and vocations and in which students and all staff can benefit from mobility abroad to achieve training and research, enjoy shared services, and in which develop flexible, inclusive and innovative curricula.

The diffused University

Within problematic and heterogeneous geo-urban contexts, university can constitute the space where to question the dynamics of human relationships, stressing on

intercultural considerations, pragmatic reflections and negotiable interests, as well as on fundamental issues to elaborate strategies of social advancement.

Within urban peripheries, universities may contribute to the redevelopment of marginal areas, by stimulating better standards in quality life, by creating youth gathering spaces, by exerting of cultural heritage's appreciation as well as of intercultural languages. Various studies highlight the projects that universities promoted toward the restructuring of abandoned industrial areas and the construction of new buildings in non-central areas, which triggered processes of improved urban accessibility and regeneration. These experiences contribute to a general rethinking of the *raison d'être* of an institution like university, which aiming at research, training, and dissemination questions the sustainability of practices for the common good (Sennett, 2012).

The university' task – among contemporary political, economic and cultural calls- is to urge individuals to react to homologation by promoting a fertile thinking where knowledge is the necessary tool to strengthen networks of cooperation and inclusion. The awareness to grant human rights through education, can produce new and advanced paths to encourage sustainable growth and mutual understanding. Individuals motivated by a critical mindset can experience the universality of the cognitive experience, focusing on a holistic model of knowledge, aimed at overcoming the traditional disjunctions produced by a strictly disciplinary thinking. This research approach reckons space and time from different perspectives, rebalancing the horizon of meaning of one's own historicity by accepting to relate also to the dark sides of human experience. Much in human action cannot be explained, but has to be interpreted. A large portion of human potential lies in creative details, in vertigo of suffering, in the intertwining of objectives, desires and expectations. Any contemporary critical scholarship expresses the hermeneutics of contexts and the pre-figuration of cultural evolution. These two principles perform in the coordination of insights to appreciate how existential oscillations are exposed to fallibilism, as well to the recognition of the incongruences through which mankind combines and de-constructs reality. In such exercise of thinking from diversity – and not about diversity – lies the plastic force that can guide expansion of education as intermediation, as engagement in a common responsibility. So forth, universities are also the frontiers where to keep alive sectors that represent minor areas of epistemic research which often contain the uniqueness of cultural traditions: niches that enrich knowledge as a whole.

Synergies

University is the privileged frontier where to preserve the concept of human being as both the subject and the goal of scientific research, where technological development is always seen as promoting human growth, dignity and the quality of life. A significant part of this dignity is the awareness of the role of the human thinking trough the

richness and articulation of scientific knowledge that make one's own project possible. Responsible technological progress can protect and improve living conditions on the planet with essential repercussions in the field of distribution of resources and dissemination of information. The promotion of education and culture is thus favoured, to contribute to the reduction of social and cultural inequalities as a necessary premise for the exercise of justice. University is the privileged frontier where to preserve the concept of human being as both the subject and goal of scientific research, where technological development is always seen as promoting human growth, dignity and the quality of life. Responsible technological progress can protect and improve living conditions on the planet with essential repercussions in the field of distribution of resources and dissemination of information. The affirmation of human being is not to be sought by halting scientific and technological progress, but rather by understanding its internal dynamics in order to orient it in virtuous ways. Job market stakeholders cannot impose the profit mindset diminishing humanistic vision of the world. Hence, takes on significant educational value also the competence to master hyper-technology: a capability that should be prefigured as fundamental in any scientific or humanistic training. Embracing digital, so useful for strengthening studies and teaching, without forgetting, however to process the new human condition of the 21st century, as the Onlife.

In any university the concept of frontier expands from being measure of separateness to becoming the start-up site where to explore methods to provide social innovative solutions. The frontier position does not express isolation or less attractiveness, very often expresses flexibility, quality versus quantity. It means dialogue, inclusive thinking. The challenge in the frontier is to risk new solutions, since – as observed by the French philosopher François Jullien – to exist is to de-coincide: to make the new happen constantly, it is necessary to detach oneself from the previous state, to de-sympathise from conventional coherence (Jullien, 2017). De-coincidence opposes to adaptation and is the driving of existence. Consciousness, as crucial human resource, always longs to de-coincide and to dismantle any temptation of settling in the spirit of closure. The educational task is to train individuals capable to foster the exploration of the possible, of the not yet given, to overcome socio-political asymmetries and inequalities. If the uniformity of globalisation presents only one destiny for humanity, university is the reality where the pluralistic vision prevails, through exploring new paradigms, breaking stagnation, in the responsible awareness that research and educational interactions are the lymph to promote new practices and resolutions. Is there, by chance, a greater privilege than the opportunity to try to make the place where fate has led us better?

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Abstract

University plays a significant role within social dimensions considered as frontier/periphery understood at different territorial scales: the global ones, concerning the imbalances between the North and South of the world; national ones, which consider the gap between advanced and weaker regions within a country system; urban ones, which indicate the marginal and/or distressed neighbourhoods of a city. Within controversial and heterogeneous geo-urban contexts, university can constitute the space where to question the dynamics of human relationships, stressing on intercultural considerations, pragmatic reflections and negotiable interests, as well as on fundamental issues to elaborate strategies of social empowerment.

Keywords: university, imbalance, social empowerment