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UNIVERSITY: THE EUROPEAN PARTICULARITY

By Stavros Moutsios



Department of Education,
University of Aarhus

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Author: Stavros Moutsios

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The European Particularity

Stavros Moutsios

Department of Education, Aarhus University
Tel.: + 45 8716 3641
Email: stam@dpu.dk

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Introduction

This essay is a historical-comparative exploration of the university as an institution of higher learning. The paper examines the common argument that the university is a European institution *par excellence* (see Rüegg 1992); it investigates the main characteristics of institutions of higher learning established elsewhere in the world and compares them with the university as it appeared in Europe in the late Middle Ages. I argue that what distinguishes the European university from similar institutions created in other parts of the world is neither its age nor its function to train experts, administrative or professional elites or grant formal certificates. The particularity of the European university, I argue, lies in academic autonomy. I define and trace the development of academic autonomy in different periods of European history as well as its travel to other parts of the world during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Tracing the university

Institutions of higher learning

The first European universities were founded between the 11th and the 13th centuries (Verger 1992). If by university we mean an institution of advanced instruction and inquiry, which grants formal degrees and produces professionals, then there is no reason to consider it European by origin. Institutions of higher learning existed much earlier in other parts of the world. China has a long history of such institutions: historians record the creation of *Taixue* as early as 3 AD, which were centres of Confucian classics preparing scholar-officials, and were spread later in various parts of China named as *Guozijian*. From the 8th century onwards the so-called *shuyuan* were established, which were private centres where recognised scholars taught their disciples (Yang 2005; Mak 2009). In Korea there were similar institutions practicing Chinese classics (mainly Confucian texts): the *Taehak* was founded in 372, and was

reestablished in 682 as *Gukhak* ('National Confucian Academy') and from the 15th century the *seowon*, the Korean version of the *shuyuan*, was introduced and became the typical school of higher learning in the country (Choi 2006). In Japan, *Daigakuryo*, the 'Imperial University of Kyoto', was established in 671 (teaching Confucian texts, mathematics, history and law) whereas *Ashikaga Gakko*, regarded as the largest and most renowned academic institution of Japan, was created in the 12th century (Frederic 2002). In Vietnam, *Quoc Tu Giam*, a centre for Confucian learning, established in 1076, is regarded as the country's first 'National University' which lasted for about 700 years (Hoop and Renkema 2000). Institutions of advanced learning are found quite early also in the Indian subcontinent, with Nalanda, a centre established in the 5th century in the state of Bihar, being a prominent example, amongst many others operating in Buddhist monasteries (Jayapalan 2000).

With regard to the university's function in awarding formal degrees, there are, again, earlier examples outside of Europe, most notably in the Islamic world. George Makdisi, a prominent scholar of Islamic studies, underlines that these Islamic institutions of advanced instruction – established originally as *madrasas* - issued degrees at all levels, including a doctorate (Makdisi 1989). Islamic countries are famously considered to have the oldest institutions of higher learning: the *University of Al Karaouine* in Fes, Morocco, founded in 859, is the oldest continuously functioning institution of higher learning and the *Al Azhar University* in Cairo, established in 970, is regarded as the second oldest in the world.¹

Nor can the production of skilled professionals, officials and civil servants be considered an exclusive attribute of the European university. China has a long history of civil service examination carried out through a competitive national assessment system (*keju*) which was connected with the above mentioned institutions – *taixue* and *shuyuan*. *Keju* operated for about 1,300 years, from 606 until 1905 (Kim 2009). Through the examination-based selection of civil servants the mandarin state recruited

¹ Interestingly, this is what is registered in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. See: Davidson and Goldberg 2009.

new members to serve in government posts, while in Europe most of that time such recruitment was taking place amongst the family members of feudal lords (Needham 1986, 9). The Chinese examination system acquired also strong roots in Korea (with *seowon* holding mainly a preparatory role), as well as in Japan where, nonetheless, hereditary privilege remained the main criterion for those appointed in official posts (Kim 2009). Access to professions based on formal qualification is also found in the Islamic world. As a matter of fact, *licentia docenti*, the academic degree granted by the first European universities, meaning *license to teach*, is said to be the direct translation of an existing Arab term (*ijazat attadris*) (Makdisi 1989, 175). From the 9th century onwards, Islamic centres of higher learning granted doctorates in theology, law, medicine, and literary arts, which could be obtained after an oral examination and which certified the holder's competence and authority in teaching and practicing the respective area (ibid).

Similarly, the main faculties of the European university (theology, arts – i.e. philosophy, letters, sciences and humanities - law, and medicine) are not exclusive to Europe, despite of course differences in content and emphasis amongst cultures and periods. As early as the 6th and 7th centuries the School of Jundisabur in Persia was, for example, a distinguished centre of higher learning, offering studies in theology, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and particularly medicine, which established Jundisabur as the most important medical training centre of the time (Frye 1975). However, both in the West and the East, medieval institutions of higher learning were dominated by religion or politico-ethical doctrines and were ruled by or functioned under the control of religious or imperial authorities. In Europe, universities operated from their very establishment under the auspices of the Papacy, which allowed them to avoid the authority of kingship or local rulers but made them subject to interventions by Rome, for which of course theology had to be the supreme and dominant discipline. Religion was also dominant in the institutions of higher learning of Cairo, Bagdad or elsewhere in the Islamic world and regulated the content of law and jurisprudence, philosophy, astronomy and medicine. However, unlike the

European universities, non-religious studies (considered as ‘foreign’ or ‘ancient’ sciences) were not allowed in these institutions and had to be pursued in the private sphere (Makdisi 1981, 78). As far as the Chinese centres of higher learning are concerned, they did provide studies in astrology and calendar making as well as medicine, science and mathematics, but the learning of the Confucian classics constituted the main body of educational knowledge. This fact along with the dominance of the Confucian mandarin in the imperial bureaucracy explains the much debated lack of further scientific development in China, despite the presence of scientific experimentation and technological inventions long before European Modernity. As Joseph Needham (1986, 14) points out ‘the seeds of modern science were there, but their growth was inhibited’.

The European particularity

In short, neither chronology, nor study programmes, nor formal certification, nor the training of administrative and professional elites justify the conception of the university as a European institution. I argue in this paper that what distinguishes the European university fundamentally from similar institutions created in other parts of the world is academic autonomy. The current definitional confusion, intended or unintended, between ‘university autonomy’ and ‘academic freedom’, can be avoided simply by making two clarifications. First, autonomy is one’s capacity to grant *nomos* (law, rule) to himself/herself and act according to it. This is in fact identical with one’s own capacity to be free, as Kant underlined in ‘Groundwork’ (1785/2005, 103) (‘What else can the freedom of the will be but autonomy, that is, the property of the will to be a law to itself?’). Secondly, as Durkheim (1893/1984) and Castoriadis (1991) knew well, individual autonomy or freedom is not possible unless it characterises, as a condition or as a pursuit, a given collectivity of persons or, more broadly, a given society. In other words, individual and collective autonomy presuppose each other. In this respect, academic autonomy means the potential of the university members to set their own rules, as individuals and as an academic community, with respect to scholarly inquiry, learning and the governance of their institution.

Three different historical periods can be distinguished in Europe during which academic autonomy emerged and eventually became an integral characteristic of the university. The first period was in Antiquity in 387 BC when Plato founded his Academy in Athens. The creation of the Academy was the actual expression of Plato's opposition to the Athenian *polis*. Plato was against the Athenian democracy, a regime permitting all citizens to deliberate and make political decisions. As he manifested in some of his major dialogues (e.g. *The Republic* and *The Statesman*) political decisions should be made by a limited number of individuals, philosophers or designated statesmen, who possess the knowledge to do so. This knowledge and therefore the political criteria and standards on which decisions are to be based should be developed by philosophers, in a space that allows for free dialogue and contestation of ideas. In other words, Plato transplanted the spirit of political freedom, existing in the Athenian polis, into the Academy, thus creating a space of intellectual freedom. Or as Hanna Arendt (2005, 131) put it: 'the free space of the Academy was intended as a fully valid substitute of the marketplace, the *agora*, the central space for freedom in the polis'. Thus the Academy, and by extension the Athenian polis, which allowed the establishment of the Academy despite Plato's opposition to democracy, became the birthplace of academic autonomy.

The second period of the emergence of academic autonomy coincides with the founding of the first universities and it has to be seen in the context of the European town which rose in the late Middle Ages. The urban environment of the medieval town provided the conditions for communal movements and for the emerged proto-bourgeoisie to promote their political aspirations for local government against the established forms of authority (emperors, kings, or feudal lords). The most remarkable expression of this phenomenon was the Italian 'city-states' (Venice, Milan, Florence, Bologna, Naples, Genoa, etc.) which managed, from roughly the 10th to the 15th centuries, to acquire independence from their established rulers and introduce institutions of self-government. The European town of the late Middle Ages allowed

the first *studia generale* to be founded as *universitas*, that is guilds or corporations of scholars and students, according to the legal norm applied to other professions, such as craftsmen and merchants. A corporation (deriving from *corpus*, meaning a body) was a community or an association (a ‘body of people’), which had an existence independent from its individual members and which was legally recognised as a person – a juristic person. In this sense the *universitates* were legally communities engaged in learning, which, notwithstanding the surveillance exercised on them by the local bishops or their dependence for status on the Papacy, could elect their authorities (i.e. a rector), define their pedagogic and examination procedures, issue formal degrees, exercise, within limits, judicial authority, and even go on strike – an innovation which, as Jacques Le Goff (2005, 124) tells us, they bequeathed to Europe.

The legal status of the first European universities made a crucial difference from similar institutions in other parts of the world. The Chinese *Guozijian*, for example, belonged to the imperial education system while the *shuyuan* were initially private establishments and later (during the 13th century) were placed under state control to function as preparatory schools for the imperial examinations (Mak 2009). Moreover, in the Islamic world, there was no legal framework that would recognise associations as juristic persons. The legal status of the madrasas was, according to the Islamic Law, that of a religious endowment (*waqf*). The madrasa, as Makdisi (1970) points out, designated a building, unlike the university which designated a community. His comparative inquiry of the two institutions concludes that ‘the university, as a form of social organisation, was peculiar to medieval Europe’ and that ‘in the middle ages, outside of Europe, there was nothing anything quite like it anywhere’ (p. 264).

The third time in European history that academic autonomy is foregrounded and in fact regarded as an integral feature of the university is at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. It is the time that the university became a matter of philosophical consideration by the major adherents of German Idealism (e.g. Kant, Fichte, Humboldt, Schelling, Schleiermacher and Steffens) as well as of political reform, with the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810. The common view

amongst all the above thinkers was that the university is a community of teachers and learners devoted to free thinking, philosophical enquiry and scientific discovery; the state should make available to the university the necessary economic means and let the members of the academic community create and impart the knowledge they most value.

Particularly aware of the role of the state and its tendency for intervention was Wilhelm von Humboldt, the initiator of the University of Berlin. Humboldt advocated strongly that any state interference would be deleterious for the university as well as for the education system at large – an issue that he discussed extensively in his treatise *The Limits of State Action* published in 1792 (2010). The purpose of education is to create self-determined personalities, individuals who draw on their own energy – a unique virtue of mankind. In order to develop themselves they should be able to act in freedom and in voluntary social intercourse, that is to create social bonds. The state's activity must be confined because it tends to restrain individual energy and generate uniformity. In the university, the content of knowledge, scientific inquiry and teaching should be matters defined freely by the academic community. Only in this way would teachers and students realise themselves as thinking individuals, with independent judgement, and, as an extension of this, as true citizens. The state should exercise a 'negative' role: it should make available to the university the resources necessary for its existence and the employment of its staff and keep its hands off its educational and scientific work. Humboldt was quite emphatic on this in a memorandum that he wrote when the University of Berlin was being founded, in which one can also notice his concern that material support from the state may be accompanied by bureaucratic functions which could downgrade academic work:

The state must always remain conscious of the fact that it never has and in principle never can, by its own action, bring about the fruitfulness of intellectual activity. It must indeed be aware that it can only have a prejudicial influence if it intervenes. The state must understand that intellectual work will go on infinitely better if it does not intrude. The state's legitimate sphere of action must be adapted to the following circumstances: in view of the fact that in the real world an organisational framework and resources are

needed for any widely practiced activity, the state must supply the organisational framework and the resources necessary for the practice of science and scholarship. The manner in which the state provides the organisational framework and resources can be damaging to the essence of science and scholarship; the very fact that it provides such organisational structures and resources, which are quite alien to the nature of the activity which they are to serve, can result in the degradation to a basely material level of what should be intellectual and lofty (Humboldt 1810/1970, 244).

Through the establishment of the University of Berlin, Humboldt and the other reformers promoted a perception of the university as a self-governing academic body which is characterised by *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit*. As Metzger (1955) put it, in his study of the German contribution to academic freedom in the USA, ‘by *Lernfreiheit* they meant the absence of administrative restraints in the learning situation’; and *Lehrfreiheit* ‘denoted the paucity of administrative rules in the teaching situation: the absence of prescribed syllabus, the opportunity to lecture on any subject that engaged the teacher’s interest’ (pp. 217-218).

The German reforms sought to consolidate academic autonomy as a European inheritance but also as a *sine qua non* characteristic of the European university from then on, as well as of any institution of higher learning that claimed the title of a university. This inheritance goes back to the Ancient Greek tradition of the free contestation of ideas, adopted by Plato’s Academy, and the late medieval tradition of *universitas*, as a legally acknowledged community of scholars. The Humboldtian proposal, part of the movement of German Idealism, and more broadly, of European Enlightenment, met these traditions and constituted academic autonomy as an integral feature of the university, but also as an *entwurf* or a *project*: a social undertaking – part of the overall socio-historical project for autonomy characterising European Modernity (Castoriadis 1991) – which was to be pursued from then on along with the institutionalisation of the university. The project of academic autonomy was to be manifested, as it was noted earlier, in three dimensions: the creation of knowledge, the imparting of knowledge, and governance. Knowledge creation should be characterised by the autonomous research endeavours of the scholar. Neither the state nor any other force is to intervene and define the content of knowledge or the criteria of its creation.

Scientific knowledge is not to serve any external interests or even the specialised requirements of particular professions. Scholars must pursue the research they are interested in without any constraints except their commitment to truth. Secondly, the university's pedagogy indicates that knowledge is not to be merely transmitted by the master and be ingested by the student; students should be discovering knowledge by developing their ability to think, to reason and to question, exactly as the masters are expected to be doing in their own research. The latter, therefore, should want the student's autonomy. Fichte, in his writings and lectures was particularly concerned with this, and, in fact, this was what he meant by 'academic freedom': 'a liberty [of the student] to do all that is right and becoming by their own free determination' and 'leaving him to his own judgment as to what is becoming, seemly, and appropriate, and to his own superintendence of himself' (1873, 188 and 192). Thirdly, in terms of governance, academic autonomy is manifested as education politics, not of course in the vulgar sense of the intrigues that the term 'politics' has acquired in today's university life, but as the explicit activity of the academic community to reflect and deliberate on the purpose, the contents and the pedagogic mode of learning in the university, and to govern their institution in accordance with their decisions (see Moutsios 2010). Crucial for the rise of education politics in the university was the development of students' movements, engagement in which is facilitated by the relatively independent phase of student life. The political dimension of the university's operation has to be seen, in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries in the establishment of a set of decision-making institutions such as elected authorities (i.e. of rectors, deans and department heads), general assemblies of staff and students, voting procedures, and academic unions. We can say that through these three dimensions the project of academic autonomy has been seeking to establish the university as a space of *Eros* and *Logos*: *Eros*, as passion to inquire, to discover, to learn and to know the truth, and as emotional energy invested in or, more precisely, cathected by the learner, on the teacher, the knowledge or the very investigative activity; and *Logos*, as speech and reason, as rational argumentation and critique, which characterises scientific research, philosophical inquiry but also political activity

based on open deliberation. In this way, the university becomes a space constituted by freely thinking, studying and speaking individuals.

However, since no institution can exist outside of its social context, the university could not operate in *freiheit und einsamkeit*, as a free community of scholars in isolation, as Humboldt (1810/1970, 243), Fichte and the other reformers wished for (Lawler 1991, 18) – unless there is a form of political organisation in place which allows for it, as the Athenian *polis* did with Plato’s Academy. European Modernity though was the era of the state. Humboldt was aware of this when he insisted that the state should stay away from the university’s affairs and that it should be the nation which should undertake education (1792/2010). But in Modernity the nation is appropriated by and identified with the state, and thus the nation-state becomes the supreme form of political organisation which takes over the main social institutions, including education. ‘A new phenomenon! The state as the guiding star of education!’ young Nietzsche exclaimed in his public lectures on the ‘future of our educational institutions’ in 1872 in Basel (2004, 78). In referring to the university, Nietzsche said graphically that the state now stood behind professors and students with an overseer’s mien, reminding them that it is the ultimate purpose of the educational procedure. And in a similarly graphic phrase, that could express the entire historical process of establishing state education systems both in his century and the following, he noted:

... a state strives here and there, for the sake of its own existence, after the highest possible expansion of education because it always still knows itself strong enough to be able to clamp under its yoke even the strongest emancipation belonging to education, and it has been found reliable whenever the most expanded education comes to good for its officials or its armies, finally always only for it itself – for the state – in rivalry with other states (Nietzsche 1872/2004, 38).

Indeed, education from the 19th century onwards was secularised, expanded and became a crucial mechanism for the construction of the nation-state, the consolidation of its power and its competition in the international arena. The university was to provide the industrial economy with technical-scientific knowledge and to train

administrative, professional, and specialist elites, whose qualifications were certified by the state. The university, in other words, became a *sin qua non* institution for a nation-state to be regarded as modern, powerful and well-placed on the pathway of economic development.

Thus, the university became subject to the instrumental control exercised by the modern nation-state and the capitalist economy, and their joint endeavour for unlimited enhancement of technical-scientific capacity and productivity. Instrumental control entails administrative surveillance over various institutions, including the education system, which is both a means for this endeavour as well as one of its main objects. The education system came under what Max Weber called the ‘purposive-rational action’ of the capitalist economy and the modern state, which controls resources, establishes calculating administrative mechanisms, and turns working persons into hierarchically dependent wage-earners (see Habermas 1986, 216-242). The university became, from the 19th century on, part of the education system and the state bureaucracy and thus part of national education policy. The state regulated access, accredited qualifications, established hierarchies within the university, formalised the professional and social identity of teachers, students and graduates and drew on the expertise necessary to grant scientific legitimisation to official policy making. At the same time, the university operated in the context of the industrial capitalist economy, its social class structure, and its requirements for technical-scientific innovation necessary for economic growth and domination in a world organised in nation-states.

The spread of the European university

Following the European pattern, the diffusion of the modern nation-state as the main form of political organisation across the world has been accompanied by the

establishment of state education systems (see Ramirez and Boli, 1987). The European university was spread worldwide as the main institutional pattern through colonialism, policy ‘lending’ and ‘borrowing’, and was placed in the service of nation-state building, technical-scientific advancement and economic development. This was a historical process which led to the transformation of existing institutions of higher learning and the *ex nihilo* establishment of universities across countries. An integral part of this process was the unique – yet, as we shall see below, least adopted – European *entwurf* of academic autonomy.

Academic autonomy took root in Western Europe where it was first generated because, as noted in ‘A History of the University of Europe’, the so-called ‘Humboldtian model’ ‘prevailed across the whole of continental Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and influenced the other two models, the French and the English’ (Charle 2004, 33). Notwithstanding the distinction between ‘models’ there was a ‘scientific spirit’ shared in Europe, as Rüegg (2004), editor of the same multi-volume work, points out, associated with academic autonomy: ‘the success of the scientific spirit increased insofar as a model adapted the corporate autonomy of the traditional university to the freedom of its members in teaching, study and research’ (p. 14). However, the author in comparing the collegiate autonomy in Britain with the rather profession-oriented universities in continental Europe, remarks that Humboldt’s legacy was celebrated more in the main Anglo-American universities than in its birthplace (p. 12). Indeed, in Britain the preservation of the corporations of medieval *universitates* and, by the end of the 19th century, the adherence of Oxbridge to the ‘German model’ created the conditions for remarkable levels of autonomy in research and teaching (op.cit.). Through Britain, academic autonomy was bequeathed to Canada, Australia and New Zealand - countries which, until the recent past, were reported to be amongst those where universities have the least state interference (Anderson and Johnson, 1998). In the USA the move towards academic autonomy dates back to the mid-19th century when the German reform proposal was gradually embraced by the academic profession and over the years became an integral part of

the American university tradition (Shils and Roberts, 2004, 164-177). As Metzger (1955) wrote, the German influence redefined from the mid-19th century the very meaning of university in the USA: ‘Neither the term [university] nor the institution referred to represented scholarship freely pursued. The German paradigm gave new value to both’ (p. 222). This influence, as the same author notes, is explicitly recognised in the ‘Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure’, signed by the American Association of University Professors in 1915.

The transfer of this ‘paradigm’ to other parts of the world was much more uneven. In Latin America, where the European colonial heritage of the *Ancien Regime* (the omnipresence of the church) left by the Spanish and Portuguese empires gave way to strong state control, universities did not achieve academic autonomy until the 20th century. A landmark for this was the ‘Cordoba Reform’, a student movement in 1918 at the University of Cordoba in Argentina and the demands it put forward (e.g., secularisation, tuition-free and wide access to university, student participation in university governance, freedom in teaching and research for all academic staff, non-intervention of the state in university affairs, full time employment for academic staff and full-time studies for students, as conditions to establish a community experience in the university). Academic autonomy was given formal status in the same year in Argentina and in the following years in the educational legislation of most Latin American countries.² While legislation did not always reflect the reality, in some cases (e.g. Argentina and Uruguay in the post WWII period) it marked a ‘golden age’ of autonomy for universities, which was characterised by extensive student participation. Nevertheless, the wave of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes which spread in the region from the 1960s interrupted this period (often in a violent way, e.g. through closing down departments, persecuting academics or declaring illegal the student unions – see Levy 1986).

² Academic autonomy became a legal provision in Argentina in 1918, in El Salvador in 1927, in Guatemala in 1928, in Paraguay in 1929, in Bolivia 1930, in Peru in 1931, in Cuba in 1933, in Colombia in 1935, in Venezuela in 1936, in Ecuador in 1938, in Panama in 1946, in Uruguay in 1951, in Honduras in 1957, in Nicaragua in 1958 and in the Dominican Republic in 1961. See: Levy 1986, 219-238.

The European university was diffused during the 19th and early 20th centuries to other parts of the world, either through the form of missionary colleges or through concerted colonial strategies intended to ‘modernise’ occupied territories and to satisfy the aspirations of local elites for professional training and social status. This was the case in countries where mainly one colonial power was in control, e.g. Britain in South Africa, India, Burma, and Hong Kong; France in North West Africa and Vietnam; the USA in the Philippines; and the Netherlands in Indonesia. In addition it was diffused through the combined strategies and influences of the French, British and Americans in Lebanon, Egypt and China and of the British and Germans in Palestine. The export of academic autonomy was limited and scattered in terms of countries and institutions according to particular colonial policies and local conditions. In the French colonies in Africa, for example, there was hardly any such export because hardly any universities were established, and thus prospective students had to go to France to study. Academic autonomy became possible in some African institutions through affiliation to the University of London, e.g. Sudan (Khartoum), Nigeria (Ibadan) and Uganda (Makerere University), but, after independence, scholars were often persecuted by authoritarian regimes (Mohamedbhai 2011). Things were better in those establishments where liberal arts were taught, e.g. the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo and the university colleges in India as well as in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Palestine (Shils and Roberts 2004, 187-208). In most cases academic autonomy became possible, not because it was officially intended, but because it was an integral element of the European university legacy.

In India, for example, the establishment of universities was a political decision of the British authorities in the mid-19th century which wanted to create anglicised local elites for the effective control of their colony. As the British official Thomas Macaulay famously promulgated in 1835: ‘we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions who we govern’ (quoted in Sliwka 2004, 13). The plan was initially put into practice through the establishment of

three universities (in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras) on the model of the University of London, minus its main formal elements of academic autonomy – e.g. elected authorities and freedom of research. However, liberal education in the core curriculum and some sort of collegial life, which were integral features of the British university of the time, contributed to the gradual opening up of a space for argumentation and critique in colleges. The inquiring pedagogic methodology, inherent in the British university, prompted the students to question both the colonial rule as well as the established cultural and religious *status quo* in Indian society. As a researcher's analysis of exam papers in the subjects of Political Economy, History and English, taught by the first Indian universities, shows, students were able to question British rule but also to scrutinise the traditional power structure of their society, such as the caste system and the role of women in Hinduism (Sliwka 2004). This was also the case in extracurricular activities (e.g. drama and debating groups) and the activities of student associations. Despite the dominant presence of privileged social groups (such as high-caste Brahmins and wealthy Parsees) in the university, associations were open to students from different social backgrounds, and to various social and political issues, thus contesting in practice the established power structure and inducing a sense of a common public sphere. As the same researcher points out (*ibid.*), by the end of the 19th century the first Indian universities had not only produced English-speaking elites looking for official positions but also the first public intellectuals and active citizens seeking social reforms and national independence.

In the two major states of East Asia however, the project of academic autonomy had hardly any success. In China, the first modern universities were founded soon after the country's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895-1896, which in fact legitimised the creation of an education system directed towards asserting state power. Both before and after the war, Chinese scholar-officials travelled to Europe (mainly Germany, France and Britain) and observed the operation of universities. Amongst the most recorded aspects were faculty and department organisation, subject specialisation and an emphasis on applied sciences. Yet what particularly attracted their attention was

the culture of free inquiry amongst academics. In observing, for example, that in Germany, one could study areas (e.g. Oriental Studies, Sinology, or Mongolian languages) with no practical intent but out of pure academic interest, Li Fengbao, a Chinese scholar-official and ambassador to Germany and other European countries in the late 19th century, wrote with admiration: ‘those who are fond of learning, no matter male or female, assiduously search for knowledge and regard learning as their lives, regardless of time and place, no need to push and no concern about use’ (quoted in Cheung and Guangxin 2009, 27). An attempt to transfer this culture to Chinese higher education was made during the republican years by the renowned educator Cai Yuanpei, who studied in Germany, and who was the chancellor of Peking University from 1917 until 1927. Both during and prior to his chancellorship, during his involvement in forming the university legislation of 1912, Cai Yuanpei attempted to establish academic autonomy in terms of research, course development and governance but with little success (Mak 2009). The establishment of universities and the ‘educational borrowing’ employed for this purpose were focusing on those elements of the European pattern (e.g. applied sciences and technology, subject specialisation, professional training and generation of expertise) which would contribute to state power and economic and technological development. Hence, attention was paid to the so-called Japanese ‘model’ - considered to have contributed to Japan’s technological and military superiority - because of its emphasis on centralised control, specialised knowledge areas and training, and the state-worshipping culture within universities. Indeed, after the Meiji restoration, Japan accelerated industrialisation and set about establishing Imperial Universities as a means of bringing in Western scientific and technical knowledge. With this priority dominating Japan’s strategy for higher education institutions, ‘the reception of the Western academic ethic and the academic freedom which is so integral to it was to have a hard passage in Japan’s reception of the model of the European universities’ (Shils and Roberts 2004, 226). The Chinese higher education system, which inhibited this reception more explicitly, evolved along these lines throughout the 20th century. As two Chinese higher education historians put it: ‘since universities serving the

nation state became a focus of attention and were widely accepted by the Chinese, the idea of university autonomy never took root in China' (Cheung and Guangxin 2009, 24).

Conclusion

In short, the university as an institution of higher learning is not exclusively European. Such institutions existed long before the 11th century in other parts of the world. What was peculiar to Europe is that the university was instituted, through different phases of its history, as a self-governed community of learners which determines its intellectual and pedagogic activity. Academic autonomy emerged in Europe and it was taken up as a project in other countries. However, academic autonomy has been a highly uneven and fragile project, the core characteristic but, at the same time, the least adopted element of university expansion during the 19th and the 20th century.

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