

UNIVERSITIES AND THE PROBLEM OF SIZE

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In recent years I have had very many occasions to observe a phenomenon that relatively soon will make itself felt also statistically. The phenomenon is simply this: more and more people and particularly at the higher ranks of the academic ladder, usually middle-aged in their forties or fifties, simply leave the universities and not in order to go to another university but in order to work somewhere else. This somewhere else can be many places. Some go to ministries, start working in (inter) governmental administration. Others go to business, start working in national or transnational corporations. Still others go to think-tanks, research institutes. And, then, a considerable number go nowhere particularly, become free lance, start working at home or in small groups together. But regardless of where they go they all have one thing in common: it is not that they want to stop doing research, they want to do more of it. Whether they succeed is another matter but that was at least an intention. Why?

When people at the bottom of an institution leave that institution the reason is usually that the mobility channels are too narrow, they do not find the opportunities offered adequate. But when people at the top of an institution start leaving then the situation is much more serious. They did not have to leave, they could wait for retirement and if they are top professors the pensions are usually very adequate. Hence there must be some other reason underlying their personal reflections and strategies, and that should lead to some reflections, possibly also to some strategies for universities.

Let us first consider what such people say themselves about their motivation. Usually the same thing: "I chose a university career because I was interested in research, but discovered that most of my time was spent in teaching and in administration". Of course, to this one could say that if they did not know that in advance they must have gone rather unconsciously through their career

as students: it is obvious to anybody that a university teacher has these three functions and that his personal happiness and well-being depends on his ability to integrate them. Moreover, it must have been particularly obvious that teaching is a part of a university career and for most people a potentially enriching one under the two conditions that one is able to lecture, at least to some extent, over the fields in which one is really doing research and that one is able and willing to have real dialogue with good students. Admittedly neither condition may be fulfilled, the reason may not necessarily be in the university structure it could also be in the university teacher him or herself, but the net result is often a sense of frustration.

However, it is obvious that it is at the third point, "administration" that the problem usually is located. So, what could be wrong with university administration from the point of view of a university professor above all concerned with research, trying to see new things or to see old things in a new perspective?

Since I myself belong to those who after 30 years of university career (first university lecture 21 years old at the University of Oslo as teaching assistant in statistics for social scientists; last university lecture 51 years old at the Université de Genève on civilization theory and modes of development) have dropped out, my personal reflections might perhaps be of interest although they may not be so general as I myself would be inclined to believe.

First, I have nothing against administration. I like seeing a smoothly running administrative cycle at work with collective decision making in small groups, with messages and ideas flowing, papers and letters being written, answers coming back, with feedback and control mechanisms. Maybe I should add that I like it particularly in the entrepreneurial phase, starting from scratch,

seeing institutions (institutes, international organizations, fields of study) take shape and grow. It is less charming in an organization that no longer has any dynamism; however, it still requires the daily input of administrative energy. Obviously it takes time away from research. But it has rewards that research very often does not have: the results come more quickly, they may be less controversial, there is not that desperately frustrating feeling at the end of any research project whether it ends with an article or a book or what not: if I now could have started from the beginning again maybe it could have been much better! Administration is a more finite.

The problem is not with good and relatively smooth administration even if it is time and energy consuming. The problem is with bad and ineffective administration. And this is not a question, I would like to underline, of the particular administrative culture or lack of culture of a university or a country although that certainly also enters. I think it is above all a question of size of the institution.

Let me return to the metaphor of the administrative cycle. Working with a limited number of people, in a small institute of, say not more than 30 staff members and then an appropriate number of students can be a distinct pleasure. If that institute has a high level of autonomy it can do very much even with limited funds. Everybody can know what everybody else is doing, there can be a shared concern not only with research matters but also with human dimensions that always enter in any kind of human setting. There is the possibility of discussing things together, informal meetings, and formally. There would be reactions to what the institute director does and they will be relatively immediate. In other words, the administrative process will be cyclical.

However, when the institution becomes big the administrative process tends to become linear. This may take the usual vertical,

hierarchical form of orders from the top: do this or that, do not do this or that. No reaction is wanted or even respected. The result is usually alienation and defiance and subservience at the bottom, and the feeling of operating in empty air at the top even if there may be some satisfaction in connection with the exercise of "power".

But this is a very classical model. There is also a way in which highly horizontal institutions may become the arenas of very linear administrative processes. The institute of the university may be so big, the faculty or academic senate meetings so crowded with people, that any decision made simply flows out of the decision making centered towards the periphery, and like water in the desert somehow disappears, evaporating or into the groundwater. After a little while the administrative initiative has died out, the desert is as dry as ever; for certain no plants are growing. Thus, I have been sitting in faculty meetings where we have "decided" things about one institute or the other, institutes unable to resolve their own inner problems, and the results of our deliberations have simply dissipated, evaporated or what not. There was never any feedback except an uneasy administrative feeling at the top that the problem had not yet been solved, for which reason it had a tendency to appear and reappear and reappear. The net result was like shouting in cotton: it serves some tension relieve to exercise one's lungs, but the cotton does not talk back, there is not even an echo.

In short, endless meetings, the pretense of being engaged in decision-making. In fact they are empty exercises, an entirely formalistic type of democracy. In a sense the vertical, authoritarian pattern of the past is almost better because it at least creates some antagonisms, some illusions that if one could only change the name of the person at the top then things would become better. Horizontal meaninglessness does not even create that type of illusion. But on

the other hand everybody feels they have to be present in order to defend their own interests, trying to sleep through the session as long as only other people are involved to be present and wakeful when one's own time comes. This can then be done on the basis "I help you so that you help me" or what often amounts to the same "I do not interfere when you are promoting your case, I expect that you do not interfere when I do the same for myself either".

In such cases it is not only a question of time taken away from matters closer to one's heart, be they research or teaching or both. It is also a question of badly spent time, ritualistic performances, and worse than that: substitution of endlessly complicated human relations of mutual aid, debts and credits for substantive insight, knowledge.

I think very few people ever cared to ask academic people in general, and professors in particular, under what conditions they were thriving, under what conditions they felt that they were reasonably effective, and even happily at work? But I have tried some questioning on my own, and almost invariably it gives the same type of answers. There are those who like the purely administrative position even when it may be somewhat empty. But intellectual creativity is fundamentally something that is done when one is alone and one has the occasion to discuss, learn from, teach some people, usually not very many, who are more or less on the same wavelength. It has to be done in the small. It can not be done in the fully public eye, nor can it be done through debates and votes in a fully democratically constituted assembly. Picasso was extrovert but did not create his great works as a result of popular vote; they were projections of things happening inside himself, themselves the results of intense experiences with the outer world in general and probably with some very selected few people in particular.

The same applies to science, and the argument has been made above that the same also applies to good administration. A small group of people with a relatively high level of autonomy is probably able to get much more done than the bigger groups, whether they are run in an authoritarian manner, vertically; or in a democratic manner, horizontally with many assemblies and meetings and votes and elections. In other words, small is beautiful, here as many other places. I do not believe in the economies of scale as applied to scientific creativity. This does not mean that any researcher does not have to put his findings before larger audiences for confirmation or criticism or both; it only means that the act of creativity itself is not in that type of setting.

However, some big is necessary. It is good for a research group and institutes to be linked to other institutes in some kind of organic setting. The idea of a university is to develop general knowledge, even unified knowledge. In practise it has been the other way round: universities have become multiversities, dispersing knowledge in all kinds of directions with very little contact with each other. But still the potential is there, and many intellectuals have many delights unenjoyed: dialogues with colleagues in other disciplines trying to understand what problems they are interested in. The simple question "what is the most fascinating problem in your field right now?" asked of ten colleagues in other fields at one's own university will not only please the people who are asked enormously since most of them like to talk about what they are most interested in; it will also be very rewarding to the questioner. But the condition for this is that there is a pluralism in discipline and in basic orientation, in other words precisely that the university is a multiversity. Hence, seek outwards, not only inwards.

Within that setting, however, I would argue strongly in favor of small universities, with small institutes with a relatively high

level of autonomy. I am not sure if it is democracy when biochemists are deciding over the inner workings of the institutes of economics or vice versa. The principle of non-interference in internal affairs should obtain also in the academic field, Let them control their own funds. Groups function better when they are autonomous, partly not to overstretch the energy of people doing administration into fields with which they are totally unacquainted.

But what should one do, then, when the institutes grow and the universities grow? The answer is very simple: create other institutes, create other universities. There is the argument of administrative economies of scale, that the university would need about the same size of administration even for very different numbers of students, hence the solution of multiplying the number of universities and institutes will be a very expensive one. However, I doubt that this is true. It seems to me that so many very big universities have extremely big administration and a very costly one because of the mistakes they make when administrative cycles can no longer be small and non-linear. But even if it should be the case it can still be argued that the benefits will be higher than the costs, because of the higher levels of efficiency and well-being in settings of more human size.

Then, back to the point of departure. I think very many researchers who at the same time are university professors today are suffering. They have spent much of their energy and time in the competition to become professors and often find the fruits of their labor rather bitter. The inability to be creative has to be blamed on something, and teaching and administration duties at the obvious candidates. What I have said above is actually that this is not merely a psychological mechanism, there is also a deep reality behind it. So they escape into other fields of life, and if the analysis above is anything near the truth then some of them will again be disappointed.



They will find governmental administration equally or even more filled with long distance administrative processes that do not touch reality, and the same would apply to bigger business enterprises. In short, their continued unhappiness may be the result of a wrong analysis of the cause of that unhappiness: it may be size rather than just the circumstance that they are working in universities. In fact, even a slight university reorganization might improve their creativity - happiness-level considerably; it may be totally unnecessary to change midlife to other types of work.

I think that sooner or later universities will have to take the consequence of this type of forces. And the consequences are obvious: big universities will break up into smaller pieces, big institutes into smaller ones. And, hopefully: smaller institutes and smaller universities will understand the comparative advantage they have and remain the size they are. In short, back to where we started, the Greek academy, the medieval university, small, transparent, direct.