On Models of the University in Today’s Russia

In current discussions of the problems that affect the development of higher education in Russia, two dimensions dominate, in which opinions diverge and positions clash. In the first (“the political and economic” dimension) the extreme poles are the liberal approach (according to which higher educational institutions ought to develop as enterprises that provide educational services while minimizing state control and liberalizing economic conditions) and the state approach. In the second (the “value” dimension), the extreme poles are an orientation toward novelty and social considerations of the moment (new problems and tendencies, new disciplines and specialties that are in demand or hold the promise of being in demand in the future), and an orientation toward spiritual traditions (“roots,” “soil,” “wellsprings,” “national spirit,” and so on). The liberal approach is inclined to go hand in hand with the value orientation toward novelty and social considerations of
the moment, whereas the state approach tends to go hand in hand with spiritual traditionalism.

In the actual field of education, the extreme poles are occupied by the private institutions of higher learning, the nonstate commercial colleges and universities that are interested in economic liberalism and are oriented toward considerations of the current moment. On the other hand, colleges and universities that have centralized financing (in particular, the technical and pedagogical institutes, military and naval institutions, and a few universities), are generally oriented toward state support and national traditions [1]. In this positioning of colleges and universities there are manifestations of wider differences between the liberal and the state-patriotic worldviews that correspond to the different political forces and the major social strata of contemporary Russia that support them. A significant proportion of institutions of higher learning, because they are in “the middle of the field” (these include the classical, pedagogical, and technical universities) have a centaurlike structure. The “fracture line” runs between more fundamental and more applied faculties and departments, and instructors with differing social and professional orientations. The force field of this “fracture” can even invade the activity and consciousness of the individual instructor or professor who has to allocate scarce time and energy between fundamental research and some applied project on contract. The standoff between the “liberal innovative” position and the “state traditional” position is also manifested in hidden but regular inter- and intraintitutional conflicts, which do not in any way play a developmental role (in accordance with starry-eyed “developmentalism”) but, instead, lead to mutual alienation.

In the present article we have made an attempt to examine this standoff between orientations in a deeper cognitive context for the purpose of finding ways to reconcile the positions and to shape more integral and flexible organizational structures in an institution of higher learning (first and foremost in a classical university). The initial intention is to try to make use of the “power tension” (if it is that solidly entrenched) “for peaceful purposes”—not as a factor of alienation and conflict but rather as a factor of mutually conditioned development [2].
The chief organizational unit of higher education is the higher educational institution. We will narrow the task and look at the structure and arrangement of universities (especially in view of the fact that many institutions of higher learning in present-day Russia are striving to attain to the university structure of their faculties). Universities are organizations that have an extremely stable, inertial structure and traditions, which make up the essential component of their cultural and social prestige. At the same time, society’s evolutionary breakthrough into the new phase of social development demands substantial innovations from them. Thanks to their independence, universities are able to reject many attempts at innovation and, very often, they do reject them. The task is how to find ways to spark interest in the kinds of innovations that are required in the universities themselves. Let us look at some ways in which sociology perceives the structure of the university today.

Judging from foreign literature, there are three basic competing models: the university as a bureaucracy (the bureaucratic model [3]), the university as a free collegial community of scientists (the liberal model [4]), and the university as a complex, conflicted organization in which groups contend for influence, power, and the necessary channels of access to resources [5].

It is curious to note the ways that the state view and the liberal view of the university correlate with these models. Naturally, both positions extol the collegial model. Very often, at the same time, those who adhere to the state view have a preference for a centralized bureaucracy and they see any conflicts as the consequences either of destructive, hostile schemes (if the bureaucracy is “our” bureaucracy) or as a struggle between healthy forces and enemies that have become ensconced in the structures of administration (if the bureaucracy is “not our bureaucracy”). It appears that those who adhere to the liberal approach are more receptive to the political and conflicted view of the university organization, but they are more inclined toward alternative models that are of a normative character. And so, in the framework of this approach the model that is developed and is even put into practice is that of the “entrepreneurial university,” signifying the kind of organization that: (1) bases its activity on purpose-driven innovation and is able to func-
tion under the conditions of risk and changing demand; (2) is economically effective and is engaged in profitable activity, and relies first and foremost on its own possibilities; (3) is liberal and has a flexible network structure; (4) among its key factors has competent people and groups, and people’s work is based on a balance between benefit and risk; (5) has administrators for whom the primary concern is not planning and controlling workers’ actions but rather providing every kind of support for their activity in the framework of the organization’s strategy, and for this purpose the administrators delegate the maximum of rights and responsibility to the people actually doing the work; (6) has the needs of the customer uppermost and is able to react to any change in the customer’s requirements in a timely and flexible manner [6].

Is it possible to make this model compatible with the classical traits of universities, features that include the reproduction of cultural traditions and values, fundamental research, and the social, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual education of an elite, and so on? How is it possible, in the process, to take account of the encompassing macrohistorical context (Russia’s necessary breakthrough into the phase of postindustrial, sensitive societies and becoming a member of the world system)? Is it possible, as well, to take into the account the traits of bureaucracy, collegial community, and competing groups and coalitions in a university organization? Without making a claim to having complete answers to these questions, we will attempt to sketch the emerging traits of the future Russian university that will be able to meet these and other requirements.

It is essential that the administrators and professors in the universities themselves be aware of the crucial role that university education plays in the present period of Russian history. Moreover, in addition to the responsibility for intellectual and spiritual reproduction (culture-centrism), for the training of highly qualified cadres (sociocentrism), and the provision of good-quality educational services (anthropocentrism)—responsibility that remains in force—there is also macrosocial and innovative responsibility, which is to say, the responsibility to serve as intellectual centers that unite the structures of ruling authority, business, and the
institutions of a civil society for the purpose of detecting and solving problems of the different spheres and levels in order to make the breakthrough into the phase of sensitive societies.

On the whole, the model that is suitable for such an essential role is that of the entrepreneurial university (see above), but with certain essential additions. A university’s economic effectiveness and profit-making activity does not mean that as a commercial firm the university should engage only in spheres and problems that yield a profit. At the same time, a university is not a charitable foundation; as a rule, it does not have enough resources to support nonprofit activity. The solution is to form a variety of coalitions with local bodies of authority, the business community, and the mass media; to establish foundations; and so on [7].

Bureaucracy (in the Weberian sense of a formal structure of job positions and reasonable rules for making decisions) will always continue to be an essential component of a university’s structure. All that is necessary is to find the most correct combination of traditional bureaucratic administration (routine aspects of the teaching and learning process, the organization of research, and work with the students) and flexible management that is able to meet the challenges and changing conditions of external connections and demands, which entail corresponding innovations.

It is often the case, unfortunately, that the collegial community in a university, if it is not a purely ostensible and decorative one (assuming that the bureaucracy functions effectively) does not play an innovative role but rather a conservative one. There is a simple explanation for this: in such a community, as a rule, high academic positions are attained by people of mature age, and not only that but authority is retained by those of advanced age, who very often predominate in the academic councils of universities and faculties. Such people do not have much use for any kinds of organizational innovations: what they want is peace and stability that will guarantee the position that they have attained, whereas the fruits of innovation are generally achieved by younger and more active university people. It would not be right—it would be a shortsighted decision—to diminish or eliminate the influential character of the collegial communities and to confer all the rights of
decision making onto innovative management: doing so would eradicate the specific character of the university and pose the danger of a rupture of the connections between generations. The solution is to involve collegial community members in new forms of activity in the universities, including forms that involve a profit or receive grant support, or have financing from local bodies of authority or from business. It is not difficult to find a sphere in which the knowledge and qualifications of eminent professors can be put to use. It is important that for them, innovations are not intimidating but instead offer them additional opportunities to enhance their academic prestige and material gain.

The most interesting prospect is that of using the model of university in which, as in any other organization, there is the constant, generally concealed struggle between groups for influence, power, and access to channels of resources. One might think that such an unpleasant perception of the university as “a can of scorpions” is not only insulting but, assuming that it is true, would most likely rule out any kind of hope for innovation, progress, and a positive social role. In actuality, everything is more complex and at the same time more simple. Let us note that such a model represents the application of the corresponding political model of the whole society to the university as an organization. The developed democratic societies of today (for example, the United States, Germany, and Great Britain) are also an arena in which groups struggle for power, influence, and resources, but this does not in any way hamper constructive discussion to resolve problems, or effective cooperation between different groups and dynamic development.

It all comes down to establishing the “rules of the game.” The energy of competing groups can be directed into various channels; what is essential is that their energy not be directed toward harming their opponents but rather toward achieving their own success in accordance with established criteria. These criteria must contain the fundamental attitudes and tenets discerned above, along with other objective requirements on the development of the university as the intellectual leader in local coalitions designed to facilitate the country’s transition to a higher stage of evolutionary development of society.
I have analyzed problems of the directionality of university education in *A Philosophy of Education in the Humanities* [2], attempting to show that in the long history of the universities of Europe, in spite of numerous fluctuations, there was constant restoration of the balance between an orientation toward *society* (the sociocentrism of educational values—meeting a society’s need for specialists of certain required qualifications), culture (culturecentrism—the reproduction and development of intellectual and spiritual traditions), and the individual (anthropocentrism—providing educational services to the individual). In maintaining this balance, the following system of educational values is set forth: *professional competence, overall cultural competence, including ecological, political, economic, legal, humanities, esthetic, communicative, economic, and recreational competence, the individual’s responsibility for values that are important to all* (life, health, dignity, the protection of civil freedoms, the ecology of the environment, and so on), and *free self-determination of values and personal self-realization in profession, culture, and life*.

How are the needs of a civil society and university education to be harmonized? It seems to me that the secondary schools should inculcate civic qualities in the individual. When it comes to the aspect of the needs of a civil society, however, the function of the universities is different: their function is to *train leaders for government and business, providing them with the necessary levels of overall cultural competence and responsibility for values that are common to all*, leaders who have experience and an interest in taking part in the activity of the institutions of a civil society. It is true, of course, that by no means all people who graduate from a university are going to become leaders. The point here is to talk about the functions of a civil society in the aspect of a university education: creating the social conditions that are necessary for students to achieve free self-determination in terms of value and personal self-realization, so that they can have a sense of responsibility for the values that are common to all and have overall cultural competence.

In this way, a fundamental, principled pattern is laid out. Every *region* has its own problems that go beyond the limits of the competence of state institutions and the sphere of the services pro-
vided by business; these include narcotics abuse, adolescents’ involvement in criminal gangs, waste recycling, improvement and beautification of cities and villages, the health of the population, ecology, the preservation of local traditions and folklore, fire prevention, and so forth. Every block of problems requires a coalition of bodies of authority and representatives of the mass media, the university, and the business community, to create the foundation for putting together the appropriate institutions of a civil society on the basis of or with the participation of profile university departments. As subunits of science and education, departments can engage in fundamental and applied research that relates to regional problems; additionally, they can involve students in research and in practical civic activity. Students can form local cells to deal with current local problems. The untapped reserves for involving college students in the activities of the institutions of a civil society are considerable, especially in view of how much time students spend on entertainment and “hanging out.” What attracts college students to engage in a particular activity? First and foremost, broad opportunities to associate with each other (meetings of young men and women on a variety of themes, opportunities to travel and to receive guests from other cities, and so forth). In their civic activity, students want to gain visible prospects of professional growth and managerial experience. Also of importance to them are opportunities to acquire social prestige (through competitions, being rewarded with foreign travel, and so on). It is essential to combine routine work with theoretical seminars and mandatory regular meetings and congresses within a region or a district, bring in colleagues from the capital city or from other countries, and to publicize their activities and successes in the mass media. Relevant special courses should be offered in the university departments that are involved. Research based on the activities of local cells as institutions of civil society can serve as the basis for doing diploma projects and defending dissertations.

A university is simultaneously an intellectual center and an information center for local institutions of a civil society, as well as the workshop that produces leadership cadres for them. It is my opinion that higher education, first and foremost the universities,
can play a key role in the thorough evolutionary transformation of the different regions and the country as a whole, in the emergence and development of a civil society. This requires fostering interest both in university structures (the administration and the departments) and in the student community, along with well-thought-out establishment of cooperation with local authorities, the business community, and the public.

Note

1. What is meant by sensitive societies are the kind that systematically and effectively use the social sciences in order to detect and solve internal and external problems on some scale or other, providing the social and emotional sense of protection, solidarity, and creative involvement that is necessary in state and private organizations.

References

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