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Cultivating the Places of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The discussion of universities and democracy has conventionally dealt first and foremost with the curriculum, or with the spirit of openness and tolerance which characterizes the scientific inquiry. In this article I have added a discussion of the situatedness of knowledge and knowledge production, and, consequently, a discussion of the situated character of other roles of the university, including the democratic role. In the light of the regress of political parties and traditional popular movements – phenomena which seem to be true both as regards membership numbers and as regards level of activity – the role as a locally and regionally situated meeting place for a vitalization and defence of democracy seems a promising one for the contemporary university. The article has also emphasized the links between culture, social capital ("the social fabric") in the surrounding society, and the economic growth and welfare of the city and region. With concepts such as *Bildung* (or education), civic competence (or civility), and culture, and I have tried to draw our attention to the actual "places of knowledge," whose importance will certainly grow in the years to come. The care, the cultivation, and the qualification of these places into supporting infrastructures for cultural life, creativity, industry, and democracy should be seen as a coherent, holistic mission. It needs recognition, and articulation, by all those who are interested in the university as a significant social factor: politicians, industry, the cultural sector, local communities, and, obviously, the academic community itself.

CULTIVATING THE PLACES OF KNOWLEDGE

Societies can be destroyed in many ways. One is to make them unjust, which is not to give equal opportunities. Another way is to sustain the false idea that there are institutions that are not dependent on citizens.

My idea is that the concept of *Bildung* – or "Education", although the English word does not capture the full meaning of the concept in the Germanic languages – must be taken down from its neo-humanist turn-of-the-century 1800 pedestal and be put right in the heart of our societal concerns. In fact, what Pestalozzi and the Romantics vaguely realized was that *Bildung* in fact revolved around something we today could call "civic competency". And part of that is a capacity for initiative, responsibility, a sense that it is necessary that *my* knowledge is essential and should be put to work – for the sake of *everyone*.

The worst thing that can happen in a knowledge-based society is when a large portion of its citizens lack this capacity. When you think that there is always somebody else coming to the workplace to take care of the things that I left behind unfinished. Or when you think that education doesn't really pay off, and exams, well, that is something for the others, not for me. Or patents, that is something for the others to care about, not for me. Or when you think that you are the only one in the world who can do these important things, the others just aren't good enough.

CIVIC COMPETENCE

From these very general reflections on civility and knowledge, or *Bildung*, I draw the conclusion that every single dollar, or Euro, that we invest in research and innovation may be wasted if we do not also take care of this larger thing called civil society.

We should opt for an informed and new relationship between the resources we put down on the maintenance of society as a learning organism, on civic competence and *Bildung*, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the resources

we put down on peaceful warfare on the research front, a war that is fought with the 99.7 per cent of the world's population that happen not to live in Sweden. The same argument would go for almost any country.

Am I advocating reduced funds for research? No. What I have in mind is rather an increase of the social energy that we put down on learning. But perhaps that we show greater concern for the foundation and the house as a whole than we demonstrate for the upper floors, where university trained people like ourselves usually dwell.

The political issue then is this: how is civic competence achieved? There is now a considerable and growing research into these issues. "Social capital" is growing as important as "human capital". Still, the answer to the question is not straightforward and simple at all. It involves tradition, history, mentality, things that are deeply rooted in society and that politicians can not easily change with reforms or budget allocations. (Which is not to say that they can not do anything.)

Everyone who has children in school or daycare realize that what is performed in those institutions is at least as important as what is going on in our research labs. It is the small children who one of those days will be the grown ups that will take care of you and me when we are old. They will love and work – the two basic things of life, a fact that even Sigmund Freud realized. They deserve adequate resources and they deserve parents that are involved, when they are in their formative period. Because when they are formed they will make up this thing called society.

And it depends on us. What children do is they imitate. Basically, that is about all they can do, apart from following their genetic imprints. That is the basic principle of learning. Scientists do it too. Harriet Zuckerman's (1977) work on American Nobel prize winners show that what they learned from their professors (of whom a surprisingly large portion were also Nobel laureates) were not facts but behaviour, a way of doing things. What Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus.

Czeslaw Milosz writes in his memoirs (1980) about his adolescence in Vilnius, Lithuania. At the age of seven he sat in the big un-heated classroom with fifty other boys and read Virgil – loud, in Latin. Hour after hour. He met the

words as music and learning as labour. The time he spent on these exercises in verse would, he wrote, later in life "outweigh whole workdays of storing unuseful knowledge".

He learned Yiddish, then Lithuanian, Polish, early on also the language of the great powers of the region: German and Russian. In school he learnt Latin and French. Sometime after the war, when he came to the American embassy in Washington, he picked up English, this "dialect in the margin of the civilized world". As an employee of the Polish radio in the 1930's he translated French poetry before going to work. During the war he ran a black market business in cigarettes, sausages and women's underwear, but alongside he clandestinely published anti-Nazi books of poetry. In Washington he sat after work, between eight in the evening and two in the morning, by his typewriter. Every day.

Civic competency can take many forms. But let us recall that most things we do we do outside of the regulated 40 hour work week. A full working year of 1700 hours (the norm of the official Swedish Accounting Agency) is less than 20 per cent of our time. In the life size "time box" our working hours just fill up a thin layer at the bottom. Societies can be destroyed in many ways. One is to make them unjust, which is not to give equal opportunities. Another way is to sustain the false idea that there are institutions that are not dependent on citizens who use their time in care, affection, and ambition.

THE SOCIAL FABRIC AND ENVIRONMENTS FOR INNOVATION

The growth of a knowledge-based society should make us reconsider the role of knowledge institutions. I refer particularly to universities, but we should think of other institutions as well. As Michael Gibbons and others (1994, 2001) have shown knowledge production is spreading to ever larger sectors of society. Consequently, it is increasingly important to gain an understanding of the relationships among the institutions of the knowledge sector – colleges, universities, and research-intensive industries – and the cultural sector and the society at large. These relationships should be studied from a national and international perspective, but the consequences of the policies, and of today's

societal transformation, should also be examined at a regional level. This analysis should be conducted from a broad regional and cultural perspective. To take a move from the educational sector, it is not sufficient to examine a variety of easily measurable characteristics of a location in order to analyze the possible consequences of establishing a university there. The results produced by the university will also be affected by less readily accessible factors such as the local historic conditions, the *mentalité* of the residents, and the social and cultural environment: what has been called the "social capital" (Maskell 1999, Putnam 2000).

Another term for this, that I have used more and more in my work, is "the social fabric." This denotes the pattern of countless contacts, meetings, and social events, which combine to form social patterns and networks, and of which it is hard to gain a comprehensive picture. In some communities, these networks are sparse and fragile, with little confidence or solidity. In others, they are strong and dense. The expression "social fabric" primarily refers to the latter, dense type of cultural and communicative infrastructure (Hägerstrand 1996, Törnqvist 1998, Sörlin & Törnqvist 2000)

In one of the few studies of this type based on Swedish conditions, the authors show that this perspective is highly relevant (Olsson & Wiberg, forthcoming). A large proportion of the empirical data in this study is drawn from Umeå, a northern middle-sized town where a university was established in the 1960's, to be followed by several governmental labs and institutes. The higher education and research initiatives conducted there have, at least so far, produced particularly positive societal effects, although primarily within a fairly limited geographic region in and around Umeå itself. The effects on more distant parts of the county of Västerbotten and surrounding regions in northern Sweden appear to be more limited.

One of the main aims of the study is to demonstrate how the mechanisms of the social capital work in the local and regional environment. The town of Umeå have certain characteristic features: religious devotion, a strong temperance movement, a great deal of interest in academic learning, and a strong social fabric in the community. These are social practices and values that can be viewed in

many ways as civic virtues, and are echoed in classic works such as Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The present study (Olsson & Wiberg *et al.*) offers an insight into what could be described as very basic features of the regional growth laboratory.

Today, there is a growing research on these kinds of relationships between, on the one hand, universities, colleges, and R&D, and, on the other hand, regional innovative dynamics and economic growth. With certain exceptions, the findings so far seem consistent: it is difficult to achieve the desired growth effect to any general or radical extent solely by establishing universities or colleges. However, there are individual cases, both in Sweden and other countries, where the establishment of universities and colleges has had large impact on a region, just like the case of Umeå. One should also be cautious when interpreting these results; the college or university is not always the only reason, or even the primary reason, for such development.

In the light of this view of regional success and regional economic growth, it is imperative that further research be conducted that analyzes the effects and societal impact of universities and colleges within a local and regional context in which culture in general is an important component.

The Umeå study also sheds light on what might otherwise appear to be a local paradox. Umeå University is one of the cases where investment in research and education has been less successful in producing local *industrial* growth. The number of spin-off companies formed during the 1980s was significantly lower in Umeå than in other comparable cities. Even the Luleå University of Technology, a smaller and younger institution, produced more spin-off companies than Umeå (29 compared to Umeå's 19), while Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg produced 161 (Olofsson & Wahlbin 1993). The expansion in Umeå has occurred in other areas: small service companies or businesses run by one or a few individuals, in many cases staff members or former students of the university. Major private and public businesses have also moved to Umeå in order to benefit from the large output of highly educated individuals, a tendency frequently noted when studying the link between universities and regional development (Gulbrandsen 1995, SOU 1996:89, www.swedepark.se).

THE ROLE OF CULTURE

However, perhaps the most remarkable development of all has been in the cultural sector. Although there are no exact figures showing the regional impact of Umeå's cultural expansion on employment and economic growth, there is no doubt whatsoever that it has been significant and that this expansion is linked to the university. The region already had a rich and well-established cultural tradition in areas such as amateur theatre and the visual arts. However, after the establishment of the university, and in conjunction with an expansion of the broadcasting media, Umeå's cultural sector expanded rapidly. Soon after the university's opening a jazz festival, several theatre groups, opera, dance, film productions, and folk music productions were established. Eventually, several more festivals and major cultural events in areas such as music, film, puppet theatre and the visual arts were also established. Umeå has museums and an unusually large number of active galleries for a city of its size. "Culture" is probably Umeå's single largest economic sector after health care and education. The active cultural life of the city indirectly benefits tourism by providing business for subcontractors who serve the tourists who come to the city because of its cultural activities.

The cultural life in Umeå has more similarities with Lund, a geographically distant university town in southern Sweden, than with its closest neighbors. Apart from other university towns, few cities outside main urban areas have had such high cultural ambitions. Umeå and Lund have been cited here as Swedish examples of a process that needs to be examined empirically in order to determine the extent of its impact. How does culture affect the dynamics of a region?

The direct economic benefits hardly reveal the whole picture. Perhaps culture helps to create what is widely perceived as a high standard of living in a town or region. Lund and Umeå, for instance, are both cities that consistently tend to rank high in quality of life surveys. It could be argued that in an information society, a growing proportion of the industry would cease to rely on physical resources nearby. The strategic resources consist of the knowledge and skills of qualified individuals, and the preferences of these individuals increasingly determine the location of businesses. This means that businesses and private individuals tend to share the same preference for location.

Consequently, a high standard of cultural activity could contribute positively to regional development. A relative abundance of cultural institutions and consumers is generally seen as one of the characteristics of expanding regions. This idea is closely linked to the size factor highlighted in the research of recent years on the relation between R&D investment and regional economic growth and the capacity for innovation (Varga 1998). A similar trend has been noted in the economic analysis of the cultural sector. Theatres, museums, and other major cultural establishments have fixed expenditures that require support by a large number of people and high ticket-prices, and in many cases, it may require a subsidy and sponsors. This means that they can only survive in cities with a large number of potential visitors. In turn, they contribute to the city's attractiveness for both tourists and residents. Sponsorship funding follows the same pattern. In Sweden, 53 per cent of sponsorship funding goes to Stockholm; Malmö, Sweden's third largest city, receives only three per cent (*Cultural Sponsorship in Sweden 2000*).

Yet, there are exceptions. Some smaller towns also have an abundance of cultural activity and creativity. This is a well-known phenomenon in sparsely populated parts of North America. Small and medium sized towns, even in Mid-Western and Southern states that otherwise lack many traditional cultural institutions, are capable of maintaining a varied and thriving cultural life, thanks to the presence of a university (Turner 1984). In some cases, universities have become something of a cultural oasis that includes museums, musical groups, theatres, concerts, and dances in towns that would otherwise have been too small to sustain this type of cultural activity. This is well worth considering for those concerned with cultural and regional policy-making in a sparsely populated country such as Sweden. Can a bringing together of culture, education, and research, all substantially funded by public funds, help create the type of local quality of life that would attract skilled individuals who, in turn, are required for innovation and development? This question, although perhaps irrelevant in conventional cultural policy, is proving increasingly important.

This line of reasoning suggests the need for a broader view of the roles and functions of universities. It is easy to conclude that if a university or college aims to promote regional growth, it should concentrate on economically orientated

activities such as engineering and the natural sciences. If culture affects innovation within the local environment, perhaps the question should also be raised as to whether the local culture is affected by the university as well as whether the university is affected by the local culture. Of course, culture can utilize any given area of information. Artists are inspired by geology and brain research as much as by the academic study of the arts. What is the significance of the humanities viewed from this perspective?

This reasoning finds support in the literature on regional development and growth. Research also suggests that many thriving regions feature a rich cultural life and a strong collaboration between both professional and voluntary individuals and organizations within the community (Nilsson 1999). Yet, there is still a substantial lack of empirical research on the relationship between universities and cultural activity, and how this relationship affects the local culture and the climate for innovation.

This examination of the way the "social fabric" affects universities and colleges suggests that factors such as physical and cultural infrastructure contribute in many ways to success or stagnation in towns and regions. The connections are notoriously complex, and can be charted only through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. However, the Swedish examples and the international literature also suggest another conclusion with a potentially vital bearing on higher education policy as well as on regional and industrial policy. This conclusion is that under certain conditions, the "social fabric" can compensate for the small size that characterizes Sweden's urban regions. So far, the debate as to whether a "critical mass" is required in order for higher education and research initiatives to pay off has primarily focused on education and research institutions themselves. The characteristics of the surrounding community, such as its cultural activity and social fabric, have been largely disregarded. It is time to conduct full-scale analyses that take account of these factors, and to thoroughly examine the role of the cultural infrastructure (Sörlin 2001). Such an analysis also opens the doors for a debate regarding the relationships between various policy areas.

KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE LOCATIONS AND THE INNOVATION PROCESS

Globalization, cross-border exchange, and virtual flows are essential concepts frequently used to describe today's societal transformation. This can easily lead to an impression of technological, economic, social and cultural processes that are isolated from the physical geography. At the same time, paradoxical though it may seem, increasing focus has been placed on physical locations, towns, and regions in a number of research areas as well as in the public debate. For instance, in his much discussed work, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996-98), Manuel Castells places great emphasis on the new knowledge-intensive environments where creative synergies arise. Similarly, in an equally extensive, albeit more historical, work, *Cities in Civilization* (1998), Peter Hall examines innovative environments, cities, and places – more often large cities, more rarely universities – that provide opportunities for unexpected meetings between people, skills, and different areas of activity. The works of Castells and Hall provide valuable starting points for further research on the creative centers of the information society, with emphasis on the interaction between knowledge and culture.

There are many links between culture and knowledge. Universities and their immediate surroundings can be seen as environments for intellectual and cultural production. Like all other production environments, they are both directly and indirectly linked with other actors, such as customers, suppliers, and service institutions. Universities often have close ties with laboratories, high-tech companies, as well as with establishments that provide cultural activities, but also with new social movements – a phenomenon visible particularly in countries which are in a state of transition to democracy.

It is widely agreed that today's industrial and economic dynamics are dependent on science and high-tech innovation, and it is also clear that key segments of this type of industry, particularly its high-growth segments, are in some way connected to research and education. In some cases, this connection can be seen geographically in the form of closely situated incubator or seed companies, or in research or industrial parks. The association Swedepark has more than 30 such parks in Sweden as members, some of which are in a state of very rapid

growth. These institutions generate ideas and innovations that are circulated gradually throughout society and the economy. These production environments could be referred to as the "creative centers" of the information society. How they work, and how well they thrive and develop is probably of considerable significance to long-term economic success at a regional level and, indirectly, at a national level.

Are university towns, which are scientifically creative almost by definition, also creative in other respects, for instance culturally? What are the lifestyles and life patterns of university towns? To what extent do they include characteristics such as cultural and ethnic variety, and how do these characteristics affect the capacity for industrial and economic innovation? Are there "creative cities," and does culture have a place in them? Are all university towns actually similar? Or are they divisible into groups of towns with different characteristics? Such questions have not been widely addressed in previous research, and would be interesting subjects for anthropological, sociological, or ethnological research.

It has been noted that in sparsely populated parts of the world, particularly North America, the cultural life of small and medium sized towns is closely linked to colleges and universities. There is also a distinct geographical concentration; i.e., the cultural events take place on campus, making the university not only an environment for education and research, but also a cultural meeting place for the local inhabitants. In communities established in the spirit of the Swedish popular movements, such meeting places were built around community halls, civic centers, prayer houses, and other local centers. These civic meeting places served as democratic institutions and centers for learning and they also served as an introduction to democratic structures and norms. These environments are now fading away, or have been transformed beyond recognition; no new institutions have been opened that reflect today's society. Universities and colleges, with their formalized educational structure, cannot provide the same type of flexible and voluntary education offered by folk movement institutions. However, at a local and regional level, cultural functions could be brought up and discussed in the context of the information society and its opportunities.

An investigative study of this type focusing on Europe and the United States could be followed by an investigation of Swedish university and college environments, focusing on the same issue. How have universities and colleges worked as centers of culture? How have they defined their ambitions in this area? How have universities and colleges set about achieving them? How have their ambitions been supported by various levels of government—county, municipal, and national? One should also examine the potential of integrating the aims of education policy and research policy with those of both cultural policy and regional policy.

CONCLUSION

So far, the discussion of universities and democracy has conventionally dealt first and foremost with the curriculum, or with the spirit of openness and tolerance which characterizes the scientific inquiry. This is good and necessary.

I have wished to add here a discussion of the situatedness of knowledge and knowledge production, and, consequently, a discussion of the situated character of other roles of the university, including the democratic role. In all likelihood – as students and universities grow in numbers and geographical dispersion – there will be a new and growing discussion about the democratic mission of the university in the future.

Universities and colleges are examples of places of knowledge and inquiry. Whether these places are located in a special city or town, or whether they exist in the virtual world, these places should be acknowledged as cultural and democratic institutions. In the light of the regress of political parties and traditional popular movements – phenomena which seem to be true both as regards membership numbers and as regards level of activity – the role as a locally and regionally situated meeting place for a vitalization and defence of democracy seems a promising one for the contemporary university.

There is nothing alien in such a role. The three regular missions that Swedish universities have by law are quite enough. Research and Education, the first two missions, can be developed and enriched, for example through engaging citizens, community groups, and other actors in society, in the formulation of research problems and in debates on the social use of results and applications. By

doing that, the university at the same time performs its Third mission, which is to cooperate with the surrounding society.

My short discussion here has emphasized concepts such as *Bildung* (or education), civic competence (or civility), and culture, and I have tried to draw our attention to the actual "places of knowledge," whose importance will certainly grow in the years to come. The care, the cultivation, and the qualification of these places into supporting infrastructures for cultural life, creativity, industry, and democracy should be seen as a coherent, holistic mission. It needs recognition, and articulation, by all those who are interested in the university as a significant social factor: politicians, industry, the cultural sector, local communities, and, obviously, the academic community itself. On the further development of this mission we have a lot of thinking to do, and even more work.

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