Afterword

Pasquale Gagliardi

The debate on university reform has often been marred by parochialism, from diverse points of view, at least in Italy. The various actors involved – academicians, politicians, the business world, families concerned about the futures of their children – tend, perhaps inevitably, to prioritize their specific and short-term interests. Academia privileges defence of its autonomy and traditions; politicians, the consensus obtainable from emphasis on the reform of the school system as part of a government programme; firms, the services expected in terms of contribution to competitive innovation and availability of skilled personnel matching their needs; families (whose opinions are conveyed by the media), the ability of university education to ensure good jobs for their children. The problem is rarely seen as authentically 'public', as a matter concerning the long-term common good: it seems as if these actors find it difficult to raise their gaze and broaden their perspective. The debate is parochial in another sense as well: the arguments adduced to sustain one cause or another are generally factual, pragmatic, logical, as if great institutional transformations are not driven by 'extra-logical', power-symbolic reasons as well (see Czarniawska, 2005, quoted by Thrift, in this volume). Even more rarely is the debate framed in an international context: in general, references to developments in other countries are random and anecdotal, and if the United States are cited it is to mythicize them, regardless of the heated debate in progress on the other side of the Atlantic (Readings, 1997).

The first and most evident merit of this book is that it enables comparisons to be made: which is the best antidote to parochialism, because it enables easier distinction to be made – with reference to both problems and solutions – between what is contingent, local and short term and what is potentially recurrent, global and long term. The first feature to emerge with clarity from such comparison is that, almost everywhere in the world, the traditional university system, perhaps for the first time in its millennial history, is being seriously challenged *from outside*. The reform projects and experiences analysed principally concern the European countries, and they seem mainly dictated by the political desire to make the university systems of the European countries comparable and fungible. Nevertheless, not only

the Australian case illustrated by Ryan et al., but especially the references that many authors make to developments on other continents, remind the reader that the phenomenon is largely *global*. The policies of the European Union are justified with reference to planetary phenomena: the advent of the knowledge economy; the end of the monopoly by universities of knowledge production; the increasing shortage of investible public resources; the new and strong social expectations placed on universities.

These expectations can be synthetically defined as expectations concerning the *measurable utility* of the knowledge produced and disseminated by universities. On the one hand, the onset of these expectations reflects the increasing current awareness of the key role that universities can perform in sustaining a country's competitiveness in the globalized economy. On the other, this development can simply be seen as a manifestation of the progressive, and apparently unstoppable, rationalization of social life. There is no doubt that the systems of cooperation based on criteria of instrumental rationality distinguish the social landscape of modernity. Society gives these systems priority in the task of translating collective values, desires and purposes into social action. And 'organizations' (utilitarian forms of social aggregation deliberately created to achieve specific ends) progressively replace or penetrate communitarian forms of aggregation – natural, spontaneous, shaped by tradition and cemented together by shared values. Churches no longer rely solely on providence or the spontaneous generosity of their members to obtain subsidies but instead resort to marketing techniques. Any self-respecting sports club – even an amateur one – must have a 'manager'; voluntary associations recruit professionals; utopian communities strive to translate idealistic visions into operational plans and goals; the professional primacy of doctors in hospitals is threatened by the increasing intrusiveness of administrators. It was predictable that, sooner or later, a phenomenon of such social pervasiveness would affect the socially important sphere of institutional life constituted by the school, and especially the higher education system. This has bred the idea of the 'school-as-enterprise' (or the 'school-as-organization') which has been gradually translated into social practices.

It seems that these developments entirely bear out Weber's predictions that the model of 'bureaucratic' administration, founded upon principles of instrumental rationality, legality and certainty, would gradually replace other models of administration by virtue of its intrinsic technical superiority, and that rationalization would imprison humanity in an 'iron cage', erasing cultural differences and producing what Weber called 'the disenchantment of the world'. As is well known, the theory of the iron cage has been subject to critical revisions. Di Maggio and Powell (1983), in their celebrated essay which founded organizational neo-institutionalism, did not

deny the standardization of structures and the encaging of individual behaviours, but they attributed these effects, not to the universal adoption of rationalization, but to the tendency of organizations to ceremonially adopt organizational forms embodying collective myths.

The adoption by universities of management models typical of utilitarian organizations (regardless of whether the superiority of such models is objectively demonstrable or whether it is mythically taken for granted) requires a *radical change* whose nature is well-documented by some of the contributions to this book. The presumption that targets of measurable utility can be set for universities from outside, and that the rationality of the processes generated to achieve them can be verified (identifying and perhaps imposing certain 'best practices'), calls into question a feature typical of traditional academic culture, namely self-referentiality. Above all, it reverses the relative importance of the two principal bases of the external consensus for universities. The 'discursive' legitimation – deriving from professing a socially appreciated value like the production and diffusion of knowledge – becomes less important than the 'operational' justification deriving from the adequacy of performance with respect to expectations (Ebers, 1995). The difficulty of the change required may be underestimated if one does not reflect on the fundamental distinction between values and goals. A value owes its orientative force to its 'unachievability', to the perennial tension between the ideal and the action which endeavours to achieve it. A specific goal, however ambitious, automatically reduces and impoverishes the value that it seeks to translate into a measurable result, and it loses – once accomplished – the ability to direct and motivate the action.

An attempt to replace knowledge as a value in itself with knowledge that has 'returns' which are demonstrated or demonstrable can only be viewed as a direct assault on the cultural identity itself of the university. When Thrift a) calls the university a 'global public good'; b) rejects out of hand any view of public higher education as a producer of private assets that produce private returns; c) asserts that the mission of the university is to produce 'broad-based people and basic research that are needed for broadly based problem-solving and innovation regardless of application' Chapter 1 in this volume; and d) stresses the irreplaceable role of the international community of 'peers' for the evaluation and progress of science, he is probably identifying a hard core of issues non-negotiable for those who have chosen to make intellectual work their profession, unless they accept the psychological and social costs of what may amount to outright apostasy. Thrift's thesis is taken up by Wedlin and Hedmo, who also assert that scientific research can only be evaluated and governed by the community of peers. And the realistic and dispassionate account of Keenoy and

Reed shows that British academics, whilst accepting that the new managerialism has irreversibly permeated the British universities, and whilst also complying with the practices of 'performance management' imposed by the government, remain faithful to the values incorporated in a professional discourse which emphasises collegiality, openness, freedom, and 'employ this discourse to construct their identity as teacher, knowledge-pursuer and knowledge-creator' (Chapter 10 in this volume).

The radical nature of the change often envisaged by the current projects for reform is shown by another circumstance. In general, these projects call for an organic bond, a capacity for communication and exchange, an understanding between universities and businesses that has never existed in the past. As is well known, the university and the business world – despite many praiseworthy attempts to link them, and with the due exceptions of certain technical-scientific faculties first founded as vocational schools at the service of firms and subsequently incorporated into the university system – have always been separate spheres of institutional life. Indeed, they embody one of the fundamental cultural polarities that we use to structure and make sense of everyday experience: that between thought and action, theory and practice, knowing and doing, culture and competence, all of which are distinctions and oppositions, ultimately related to the distinction and opposition between the mind and the body that traverses much of Western thought.

It is likely that new linkages with the world of business are essential for the survival of universities today. But it is equally evident that establishing these patterns of exchange entails the transformation of deeply-rooted mentalities and attitudes. The counterproof for this statement is the fact that the two cases of successful collaborations between university and business reported in this book (those of the Polytechnic of Lausanne, described by Callaert et al., and of the City University analysed by Creagh and Verrall) concern polytechnics, where the emphasis on applied research is not seen as abdication or barter but as the obvious consequence of the fact that in the engineering sciences understanding requires application, and vice versa.

The book shows that – besides polytechnics – business schools (by definition the repositories of the managerial culture which universities today are required to adopt, and long accustomed to dialogue with enterprises) can perform a crucial role in experimentation with models of exchange and interaction between universities and businesses, in filtering and adapting to academic culture the impact of the reform policies that governments impose in light of the new social expectations towards universities. This thesis, brilliantly argued and documented by Hopwood in his contribution, is borne out by the fact that the majority of the contributors

to this book work at business schools. Their affiliation with institutions in a certain sense hybrid, long experienced in management of the interweaving between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', and more accustomed to a multidisciplinary approach to problems, accounts for their ability to analyse the manifold tensions and the heterogeneous dynamics produced by projects for reform.

Exemplary demonstration of this ability is provided by Marie-Laure Djelic, whose chapter explores the challenges and the opportunities offered to PhD education by the Europeanization of programmes. On discussing changes that European universities must undertake to manage a matter of such crucial importance as education to knowledge production in the globalized economy, Djelic stresses the need to reconcile numerous contrasting demands: homogeneity and difference, national dimension and the European perspective, market and politics, basic research and applied research, disciplinary specialization and an interdisciplinary approach, academic culture and managerial culture, autonomy and coordination. Her analysis highlights the complexity of problems which do not lend themselves to superficial solutions. But at the same time it shows that these can be concretely addressed by inventing new spaces for intermediating and overcoming the sterile opposition between old (familiar) and new (extraneous) modes of action. This is a laborious process, but it is the only one possible.

In any case, as Engwall efficaciously shows when analysing the growth, professionalization and upgrading of information activities in Swedish universities, the joint effects of normative, coercive and mimetic pressures seem to have initiated a process that has irreversibly taken universities out of the ivory towers to which they have hitherto so carefully guarded access: they have left isolation to become increasingly embedded in their environments. Once again using the analytical categories of neo-institutional theory (which prove particularly suited to interpreting the process of university reform), Engwall envisages new 'organizational fields' comprising governments, universities and firms, and whose organizational structures will tend progressively to resemble each other.

Engwall's observation reinforces a thesis sustained or adumbrated in other chapters, and which I count among the important results yielded by the comparative exercise that the book permits: no serious university reform is possible without the active contribution of all three of the above actors, and the mimetism of structures does not imply confusion, overlap or exchange among their respective roles. This thesis puts paid to proposals for reform that envisage superficial shortcuts such as those which postulate the end of politics and the advent of the market as the sole arbiter of the survival of educational institutions. Such shortcuts usually disguise their crassness with the promise of autonomy and an invitation to universities to prove

their worth by becoming 'cultural enterprises' able to survive on their own in a fiercely competitive environment. Although some academics seem flattered by these shortcuts (I still remember with amusement the rector of a large Italian university who, when I introduced him as such before his speech at a round table which I was moderating, corrected me by saying: 'Please, I am not the rector of university XXX but the CEO of a business which invoices a million euros every year!'), their proponents forget that the majority of universities around the world have received public funding, or anyway guaranteed resources, without their right to exist ever being questioned, and that they are accustomed to operating in a situation of monopoly or, in the best of cases, largely imperfect competition. Why should universities suddenly have to learn how to behave like businesses? Why should they be abruptly obliged to learn how to reason in terms of market share, strategic positioning, and profitability of educational products? The most evident proof of this cultural incapacity (which is not a fault but the simple consequence of a state of fact and a history) is the ingenuousness and sometimes blatant ignorance of the world 'out there' with which – at least in Italy – universities have often interpreted the needs of the business world and exploited the opportunities for autonomy offered by reform projects. Once again, it may be that these competences and these new cultural orientations are gradually acquired, but it is unthinkable that the state should be indifferent to the fate of a 'public good' like the higher education system.

This is not a matter of choosing between two equally unsatisfactory alternatives: a state which relinquishes policy-making on research and education or, contrarily, a state which minutely scrutinizes the modes and results of education and research. This book – and particularly the contribution by Raivio – suggests a third route: decisive public intervention in the *overall planning* of the higher education system, with the intent of creating a versatile and diversified system rather than a homogeneously mediocre one. I believe that the best way to conclude these reflections is to remind the reader of the lucid remark made in Raivio's foreword: the weakness of the European university system compared with that of the United States derives, at least to the same extent, from the smaller amount of resources allocated to education and research, and from the abysmal way in which that smaller amount of resources is invested in Europe compared with the United States.

REFERENCES

Czarniawska, B. and G. Sevón (eds) (2005), *Global Ideas. How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*, Malmö, Sweden: Liber.

DiMaggio, P. and W.W. Powell (1983), 'The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review*, **48**, 147–60.
Ebers, Mark (1995), 'The framing of organizational cultures', in S.B Bacharach, P. Gagliardi and B. Mundell, *Studies of Organizations in the European Tradition*, London: JAI Press.
Readings, Bill (1997), *The University in Ruins*, Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.