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## SECULAR EDUCATION AND A CIVIC CHALLENGE

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It has become a commonplace in reflecting about contemporary societies in Europe to complain about the phenomenon of a so-called “democratic deficit”. For the most part, the phrase describes the emergence of the divide between political institutions and population, politicians and citizens, policies and people whose interests are affected by them. If democracy is defined as a form of government that is exercised *by* people and *for the sake* of the people, and presupposes incessant communication between political agents and citizens in order to strike the best possible balance between their plural and divergent affected interests, then it is put at risk whenever this communication fails. There could be plenty of reasons for such a communication failure dependent on the self-understanding of their civic vocation of citizens themselves, their capacities and skills for civic engagement and action, the plasticity of public institutions for change reflecting the public demand, the popular perception of complex public structures as more or less embodying and representing the dominant public interest, etc. In this article, we are going to address the role of higher education in Europe in empowering young people for mature public life. We would like to explore the current approaches in European secular universities concerning how and to what ends they train young people for active democratic citizenship today. We will identify the distinct problems of a secular approach particularly in light of the challenges that beset Ukraine in the present times. It will turn out that Catholic higher education has pretty much on offer to successfully meet these challenges and get rid of a democratic deficit characteristic of a post-Soviet Ukrainian society.

### **Higher education on a move**

For the last twenty years, higher education in Europe has undergone revolutionary change. A Polish scholar Marek Kwiek<sup>1</sup> attributes this revolution to the quite radical redefinition of the relationship in the triangle between university, state and market. He believes the main drivers for far-reaching transformation of higher education in Europe to be as follows: (1) loss by the nation-state of its monopolistic role in the socio-economic development of the countries; (2) revision of the traditional European social welfare state model, including the scale of its funding of the social sector; (3) subordination of the entire public sector to economic rationality and corporate business culture (except for some more affluent EU-15 countries); (4) emergence of a new EU policy in the field of education, science and innovation (establishment of EHEA, ERA, etc.).

According to Kwiek, transformation of the nation-state’s role is facilitated by the transfer of social interaction into transnational social networks; by the decrease of state control over its economy as a result of the free movement of capital, goods, services and labor across territorial borders of the countries; by making the cultural and political loyalty of citizens the matter of personal choice; by expansion of migration and the rise of ethnically heterogeneous societies; by increasing emergence of “hybrid” identities, resulting in the fact that national identity often ceases

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<sup>1</sup> Marek Kwiek. *The University and the State. A Study into Global Transformations*, Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

to be the primary one and gets closely mixed with other forms of identity – professional, religious, sexual.

In Kwiek's view, transformation of the welfare state is manifested in the fact that the state is increasingly assigned the role of "partner" and "controller" rather than direct agent of the economic growth and provider of social services. The state more and more reduces its duties in public affairs, becomes more selective in sponsoring them from its assets, and increasingly transfers its primary responsibilities to private sector. Thus, universities are also supposed to compete for limited public funds in the "zero sum game" with the primary and secondary education, elderly care, healthcare, subsidies for the poor and unemployed, social security, penitentiary system, law enforcement institutions, military, and state administration. In addition, powerful migration weakens solidarity and trust on which the post-war welfare state was built.

By "privatization" of higher education, as a trend of both public and private universities to adopt standards of operation current in private enterprise, Kwiek emphasizes an increasing focus on the student as a customer, on the idea of higher education as a "product", on the increase of net income as a primary goal, on the adoption of management practices that are traditionally associated with private businesses (strategic planning; contract hire and outsourcing; implementation of critical performance indicators; etc.). In other words, higher education is increasingly seen not so much as a public good but rather as a private and personal benefit.

And, finally, under the influence of the Lisbon strategy declared by the European Council in 2000, universities are called to become partners in creating the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. They should help the European society to achieve sustainability in its economic growth, to improve the situation with the availability of jobs and to reach a higher social cohesion. The clue to achieving this goal consists in the modernization of the educational system which is the aim of the Bologna process.

Where are we moving? It seems that in the near future we can expect more market and less state regulation in higher education. The role of government will be eventually decreasing. In the developed countries education is nowadays seen, primarily, as a means of individual and collective economic advancement. Formation of a citizen is likely to recede into the background and give way to the development of entrepreneurial skills and competences. Nation building is taken for granted and competitiveness as an education objective is going to move into the foreground. In other words, individualistic aspirations partly push into the shadow the civic and public nature of the educational project.

Kwiek rightly notes that continental university in its modern form of research institution has traditionally had close ties with the state and relatively remote links with the market. Now, when under the influence of globalization and market forces state becomes weaker, university's role and mission as a public institution gets revisited. In Europe, outright economic vision of higher education gets more and more in power. Criteria for evaluating the performance of universities with a focus on their ability to prepare professionals who are able to respond quickly to the changing labor market and adapt to the volatile conditions of dynamic economies are preferred to those of traditional truth seeking and educating the whole person<sup>2</sup>. Research activities are often subordinated to economic feasibility. The university is seen primarily in terms of an engine of economic growth and competitiveness, provider of skilled workers for the "knowledge economy" and well trained members for new knowledge-based societies.

As a consequence, contemporary higher education in Europe is characterized by increase in the autonomy of higher education institutions both in determining the content of education and in their governance; by transition from direct state control of academic institutions to independent peer review of their achievements and the management of financial incentives for quality performance; by exploring new ways of funding diversification and by developing entrepreneurial mentality in response to the increased competition in the education market; by the rise of public expectations

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<sup>2</sup> "Forging national identity, the role of the nation as a repository of historical, scientific and literary achievements and planting of national consciousness and loyalty to fellow citizens is no longer sufficient to justify the existence of the university. ... Neither service to truth nor to nation... are mentioned in the present debate on global or European level".

about the social responsibility of the university; by search for more efficient synthesis between education, research and innovation within the university settings. In other words, the understanding of the university as a social institution is undergoing quite radical changes.

Will the contemporary university be ultimately able to creatively combine its traditional functions of an impartial search for truth and education of nationally conscious and responsible citizens with these new demands of open economies that push the university to transform itself into a business establishment?

### ***Civic education: conceptualization***

Civic education seems to be as old as formal education itself. One of the primary objectives of higher education in history was precisely to instill the civic virtues into its addressees. It was widely believed that an educated or cultivated person is first and foremost marked by his or her ability to distinguish between private interest and public good and his or her power to act in favor of the latter beyond all inclinations to pursue solely the former. The delivery forms of civic education might certainly have differed throughout history. Among the best known models, it was realized in the form of *artes liberales* approach or its *core curriculum* counterpart.

However, with the rise of modernity and emergence of plural conceptions of political life and justifications for political order a meaning of the term “citizen” was beset with the ambiguity. There emerged a great variety of competing ideas about the rights and responsibilities of citizens stemming from utilitarian, social contract, Marxist and democratic traditions. As a result, there could be several different approaches to understanding and implementing civic education.

A Ukrainian scholar Inna Sovsun believes that these approaches could be distinguished according to two main criteria. The first deals with the issue whether civic education should focus on the needs of the political community in stability and support, or the rights and freedoms of the individual. It is reflected in the contemporary discussion between communitarians and liberals. The second criterion asks whether the emphasis of civic education is to be placed on promoting citizen’s loyalty and obedience to the legitimate government or rather on the ways and tools of his political participation. According to various combinations of the elements of these alternatives, Sovsun distinguishes four approaches to civic education:

- in a *patriotic* approach one exhibits an understanding of civic education as a formation of commitment to the political community (state or nation) in the name of its support and stability, and focuses primarily on the study of history;

- in a *moralistic* (communitarian) approach one upholds the crucial role of civic education in supporting existing political institutions, but at the same time recognizes its contribution into every person’s personal growth as a citizen through his commitment to the community and sharing with it common values and beliefs; it does not dissolve an individual in a community but presupposes the predominant ideal of “good life” as a way to follow for the entire society;

- in a *deliberative* approach one considers citizenship as more active position, and believes civic education to provide knowledge and skills to participate actively in a communal life; simple commitment to the widely shared ideal of “good life” is not enough, and the success of a political community requires participation of its members in the public life;

- in a *critical* approach one refers to advancing the role of the individual in political life and sees civic education as forming citizens with enough knowledge to understand political processes and institutions who can not only be involved in their work, but also to change and improve them through criticism.

Sovsun believes that the concepts of civic education that were prevalent in Ukraine until recently mostly derived from the first two approaches – patriotic and moralistic. This implied the primary emphasis on loyalty as basis and manifestation of citizenship. Instead, the focus on one’s deliberative engagement and critical participation in political life was only moderately present, and this constituted one of the major gaps in civic education in Ukraine. The revolutionary events of 2013-2014 marked a conspicuous transition in understanding what it means and takes to be a citizen

in a new Ukraine. This will be undoubtedly reflected in the approaches to conceptualizing and implementing the civic education.

### ***Challenges for civic education in secular universities***

If we stay with Ukraine, it is possible to identify several challenges for education for democracy as it was and still is by default exercised in secular universities. These are as follows: (1) formal education for democratic citizenship *versus* active community engagement; (2) value-free education *versus* motives that can provide the foundations for civic engagement; (3) procedural approach *versus* establishing sources for empowerment leading to action.

### ***Educating by practicing social engagement***

The Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education shows awareness that education for democracy cannot and must not be reduced to acquiring information and knowledge on what democracy is and how it functions. The genuine civic education implies obtaining of the suitable skills such as critical thinking, communication, team work, negotiations, discussion, etc. and taking the prerequisite attitudes or habits of action or so-called civic virtues like civil courage, solidarity, sympathy, loyalty, justice, etc. It is striking to see that in many universities in Europe this kind of formation is more and more taken to be not the direct concern and job of universities themselves but rather of different NGOs. This seems to be the case in Finland where the university is supposed primarily to pass knowledge to new generations, produce new science and drive social change through innovation. If we prescind from such extreme cases and focus on more classical examples of the contemporary secular universities, we will still discover certain excess of life in the ivory tower within academic communities.

This is evident from the guiding documents elaborated in the course of the comprehensive joint effort of the European countries to reform higher education. Such crucial statements as the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area<sup>3</sup> (QF-EHEA) and the European Qualifications Framework<sup>4</sup> (EQF) which define expectations for learning outcomes and competences within European educational institutions mention many great things except civic knowledge, skills and virtues. They refer to the abilities of students to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, to critically analyze, evaluate and synthesize new and complex ideas, to reflect on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of acquired knowledge, to apply knowledge and problem solving powers in new or unfamiliar environments within broader and multidisciplinary contexts, to make a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge, etc. But these documents clearly lack any explicit reference to civic engagement as an expected outcome and reward of education. It is no wonder that some countries like Georgia while designing their own QF decide to include explicitly civic virtues as a goal of higher education and one of the key indicators of the university's success.

It is perhaps audacious to ascribe this omission of civic dimension of higher education to the shift towards commercialization in academia. It rather stems from the attitude of taking for granted the socializing effect of higher education in Europe which precisely generated a deep concern of the Council of Europe Charter. In any case, it is lamenting seeing low numbers of people participating in the different kinds of elections, or the survey results on people ready to defend their own country in the case of war, etc. It is precisely the work of civic education to help people reach beyond their comfort zone and discover a world of the common good that might demand self-abandonment and solidarity. It is striking to see that QF-EHEA appeals to the need to develop skills of team work, presentation, communication, etc., but all of this does not serve some higher purpose and does not go explicitly beyond an ethics of "rational egoism".

One gets an impression that nowadays the university is not considered a privileged place for civic education in Western Europe. But the opposite seems to be the case in Eastern Europe and,

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/QF/050520\\_Framework\\_qualifications.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/QF/050520_Framework_qualifications.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/descriptors-page>

especially, in Ukraine. Though it was primarily through secondary education that students get their knowledge about society, democracy and interaction between an individual person and state, it is within higher education that they get familiar with the civic engagement and develop their habits of action in a free society. It is empirically proved by the fact that students were driving forces of the revolutions in Ukraine that led to the collapse of the communist political system in 1991 and the farewell to the Soviet authority in the culture and people's heads achieved during the Maidan revolution in 2013-2014.

Nevertheless, the important question remains whether this public activity of the students was *thanks to* or *despite of* the situation with civic education in the Ukrainian higher education. We go for the latter. It must be said that civic education in the Ukrainian university setting always suffered from a significant degree of formality which took shape of the gap between theory and practice. Perhaps, it is a characteristic of a country that has never managed to function as steady and efficient democracy. The rule of law has never acquired here the prominence and attraction that it has in the Western culture. Corruption embodied in the so-called "phone rule" and "right of might" dominated social interaction. Education – both secondary and higher – was a matter of state and state has never become the agent of changing the rules of social interplay in the spirit of democracy, rule of law and the culture of human rights.

The education for democracy and rule of law as it was offered in a university setting in Ukraine could only get discredited. The theory did not match the reality at all and students in state universities were not encouraged to challenge this reality and ask tough critical questions about this gap. Moreover, they tended to adapt to routine rather than trying to change it. In such circumstances secular universities needed external push which eventually came from international organizations, church institutions including a Catholic university, and NGOs. These agents provided opportunity for civic education by *practicing* social engagement, democracy and respect for human rights.

*Educating by practicing* is a privileged tool for overcoming formality in civic education. This is commonly realized through various kinds of community programs. Some universities abroad may even require their students to get this kind of experience and realize some community project. In Ukraine, public exposure was too often reduced to mere participation in official ceremonies or formal university celebrations. Confronted with this situation, students felt even more strongly the formality of civic education offered to them. This feeling was augmented by the realization that professors themselves were quite reluctant about their own participation in civic or political life. It is paradoxical that while having taught students about the institutional means of defending their civic rights and interests, teachers themselves mostly had recourse to non-formal mechanisms in dealing with their social conflicts with the state or other people. They relied more on personal contacts with influential people than on the institutionalized means of public engagement. This strongly inhibited their ability to teach students to care about their civic rights and use democratic tools to defend them.

#### *From knowing what to do to knowing why to do it*

The role of faculty in civic education and its relationship with students is fundamental. It is professors who can play the crucial role in helping students in their transition from knowing *what* they are supposed to do as citizen in a democratic society to appreciating *why* they should do it. In a secular setting this transition is complicated either by value-free approach to education in general or by appealing to identities rather than values as motivating reasons for civic engagement.

Mark Roche from the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana made a brilliant point by emphasizing the fundamental distinction between post-modern and classical approach in basic learning attitudes that might underlie communication between students and teachers. To paraphrase his point, irony and play are often regarded as the most productive ways of intellectual communication in a post-modern value-free pedagogy. One needs to adopt such attitudes if one is to avoid an inevitable inclination for indoctrination which emerges from the power relationship between teacher and student. Thus a student can keep a sound critical distance to the content of his education and teacher's personality, develop more democratic relations with his professor, and

avoid infantile subordination to his authority. The flip side of this approach is a sarcastic attitude towards an educational content, a risk of presumptive and arrogant approach to texts and their authors, and a loss of capability of their unbiased and receptive treatment.

The classical approach favors an attitude of appreciation of a text and its author. If a young person wants to learn, he has to adopt Socrates' motto "I know that I know nothing". Deprived of this basic attitude of appreciation, a person might lose his ability to acquire convictions, experience commitment, belonging and rootedness – things indispensable for intellectual and human maturity.

Moreover, in a value-free approach there is a risk that a young person may lose a feeling of meaningfulness of the learning activity itself, since it will not contribute to establishment of his interiority, his innermost self. The point of learning is not exhausted by introducing a person to the wealth of knowledge. The real act of cognition is not just a *function*, but a genuine human *act*. Max Scheler speaks about so-called human functions like hearing, calculating, smelling and opposes them to personal acts of love, joy, or cognizing. The former exhaust their meaning in mere referring of a person to their intentional objects and do not color a person's consciousness with distinct personal qualities. The latter in the very act of their targeting other objects return to the human person himself and define his conscious core. By discovering values in an act of appreciation a young person will not feel instrumentalized within the educational process. Moreover, he will be able to answer the question *why* he should step beyond his private life and abandon it for the sake of common good. He can acquire motives and not only knowledge how to become a good citizen.

In Ukraine, this question of "Why to be a good citizen?" was often answered by appealing to national identity and patriotic feelings rather than to an ideal of one's human dignity and a personal free choice based on the discovery of values. And, honestly speaking, it did not really work. Western Europe faces this challenge when confronted with a massive immigration and a challenge of migrants' integration within a society. It has developed different strategies to cope with this issue ranging from multiculturalism to melting pot approach. Thus, Jurgen Habermas insists on the need for a new type of citizenship in Europe which is not based solely or primarily on ethnic allegiances. He dreams about a political community which identity is grounded not on special ethnic and cultural form of life but on legal principles rooted in a political culture.

Ukraine faced an urgent need to combine civic values and national identity when confronted with its emancipation from the Soviet paternalistic past embodied in the *Maidan* revolution and present Russian imperial expansionism. Habermas' appeal perfectly resonates with an insight of the twentieth-century Ukrainian philosopher Viacheslav Lypynskyi who said that "the basic difference between Ukraine and Muscovy is not the language, nor the tribe, nor the faith, nor the appetite of the peasant for the lord's estate... but a different political system which had evolved over the centuries, a different ... method of organizing the ruling elite, a different relationship between the upper and lower classes, between the state and society – between those who rule and those who are ruled." The *Maidan* movement was also based on *values* and *not identities*. By contrasting values and identities we do not want to introduce any „value-free“ definition of identity. Rather, we want to emphasize the emancipatory and authentic character of human impulse behind the movement which enabled people to bridge differences of imposed identities of language, ethnicity, generation, social origin, political allegiance, etc. The common values proved to be stronger than dividing identities. But it must be also said that the national identity was not abandoned but rather redefined and profoundly modified. It is striking that thanks to the *Maidan* Ukraine managed to articulate its peculiar *national* identity and its distinction from Russia by appealing to *civic* values and principles.

Ukraine's example offers powerful evidence that democracy cannot thrive in a society of value-indifferent citizens. It is precisely an honorable task of universities to deliver value-based civic education and bring their students into lived contact with the world of values that are critical for promoting free society and just governance.

#### *Discovering sources for civic empowerment*

In his "Sources of the Self" Charles Taylor rebukes modern ethical reflection for its entire disregard of the notion of *moral source*. It derives from its affection for *procedures* at the expense

of *content*-based approach. This difference could be exemplified by the vision of rationality. In a procedural framework rationality of thinking depends not so much on its final outcome but on *how* a person thinks, on the *method* of his thinking. For Descartes thinking must be clear and distinct to be truly rational. In a practical philosophy a shift to a procedural approach marks the triumph of the modern idea of unlimited freedom of the individual subject. Being disembedded from his culture, the human person looks for reasons for its practical behavior not by appealing to any particular form of life or ideals but to some universal style and procedure of rational deliberation. It seems to be the only way to safeguard universality of moral norms and defend unlimited human freedom. Thus, Kant appeals to a maxim's aptitude for universalization and formalization in the form of categorical imperative. Habermas believes that validity of a norm is based upon the particular process of its articulation through reaching consensus in a free and unforced communication.

Taylor points to the problem that the recognition of some ideal as constitutive of the highest good of the human person's practical life could empower a person to act and pursue such an ideal. It could become a moral source that inspires a human person and empowers him to *do good, love good and become good*. A moral theory which only instructs us how to act morally and how acquire certain moral qualities but does not empower us to *love* what is good is ultimately useless and impotent in orienting us in a practical life. It must be phenomenological in spirit and it must not only provide a definition of the good but help a human person to discover it and experience its inner appeal, to arouse love and respect for the good, to inspire our commitment to it.

The discovery and appreciation of civic values can engender affection and inspiration for genuine and full civic life. This appreciation could turn into a moral source for empowerment for action when it will be supported by a *culture* of civic engagement and service. Secular universities that endorse a modern vision of the human person as disengaged individual subject free of any allegiances and commitments run a great risk of disempowering young people for civic action. Unless an university creates a clear expectation about the *good professor* and *good student* that will include civic engagement as its integrate part, unless success in participation in public affairs is appreciated and rewarded by the university's authorities and the entire academic community, unless social service becomes an unwritten rule of academic life, the civic life will remain a concern of an individual conscience and not a part of the university's culture. Catholic universities are in a unique position to promote the vision of an academic community which puts civic service and engagement into the center of its life.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, a way to rectify malfunctions manifested in a democratic deficit is not taken to be solely technical in nature. On the highest level of European institutions there is clear recognition, that it presupposes the profound change in the matter and manner of education. It requires a change in people's concepts, attitudes and value-preferences. And, universities are called to perform this complex task. It turns out though that in the present situation of a rather significant shift in the understanding of the mission and role of higher education prompted by the demands of knowledge driven economy the secular universities might find this task of providing civic education even more difficult to complete. Unless education for democracy is part of the university's DNA, there will always be a risk of degrading it to the level of only remote priority. As universities tend to become even bigger in size, as a demand for research deliveries becomes even more critical for evaluating their performance, as on-line education firmly establishes itself as valid alternative for traditional ways of conveying specialized knowledge, it will be even more problematic for a secular university to recover or rediscover its vocation as agent of education for democracy. It is worth mentioning that many universities throughout Europe responded to the call by opening undergraduate and graduate programs in liberal arts. But these are small programs, exceptions that only prove the rule. It is up to Catholic universities and HEIs to take a lead in this process and turn a new demand for education for democracy into their competitive advantage. To stand up to the challenge will require from Catholic universities to revisit their rich tradition and resources in re-conceptualizing the idea of democracy and its value and to present a strong Catholic case for a pluralist value-based society aiming at maximizing human freedom, promoting human flourishing and affirming human dignity.

As we keep saying in Ukraine, it is no less than a task of making a transition from the Revolution of Dignity to a politics of dignity, economy of dignity, education of dignity, media of dignity, etc. In other words, in Ukraine the work to rediscover through education the sources of the civic ultimately amounts to a task of building “a country of dignity”.