

## “The Idea of the University” Symposium

Cres, Croatia, 23–26 September 2012

The beginning of the 21st century seems to be marked by crisis – first of all the ongoing global economic crisis which, on one hand, introduced new, and on the other, unveiled old, deeper political and social crises more or less explicitly present since the last century. These trends could not circumvent the area of higher education, and university as its primary institution, which is evident not only in the recent and often controversial attempts of university reforms and new legislation on higher education, but also in the growing number of public discussions throughout the world on the role of university in the contemporary society.

In this spirit, and having in mind the importance of this pressing issue, the Croatian Philosophical Society decided to organise a symposium dedicated to issues that modern institutions of higher education face – issues that put into question the very concept of university. The symposium, appropriately titled “The Idea of the University”, was held in the framework of the *21st Days of Frane Petrić*, annual scientific and cultural event organised by the Croatian Philosophical Society and the Town of Cres, from 23 to 26 September 2012 in Cres, the birthplace of the famous Croatian renaissance philosopher Frane Petrić (Franciscus Patritius). More than 70 participants from twelve countries and of diverse scientific and academic backgrounds presented their lectures and engaged in discussions on the past, the present, and the future of university.

On Monday, after the opening ceremony and welcoming speeches, the working part of the symposium started with an introductory discussion lead by Mislav Ježić (Zagreb, Croatia), President of the Organisation Committee of the Symposium, and Richard Gombrich (Oxford, UK), who participated via video-link. Gombrich presented his views on the development of situation at universities in the UK in the last few decades, focusing on the changes in organisation, aims, and roles of higher education, especially under the influence of neoliberal policies since Margaret Thatcher’s premiership. Regarding the relationship between the university and government, economy, and society in general, he argued that one of the main aims of the institution of university is to educate members of society to become competent citizens as active members in shaping the society’s future. The duty of the government is to ensure conditions for this education. Economic and business views and demands regarding higher education are not concerned with this at all – as Gombrich stated, they are concentrated on merely training people for certain occupations, and do not ensure education in the above sense. On the other hand, an important role the university should have is to serve as counsellor in policy making, especially having in mind intellectual honesty as the basic virtue of scientists which politicians generally lack. The autonomy of university, brought into question by growing interference of state and business, is a necessary condition for fulfilling this role, condition that needs to be preserved. The influence

of economy on modern reforms of university organisation, Gombrich warned, has also caused the decline of cooperation between scientists, professors and students, as well as universities and its constituents in general. In favour of market-like competition, thus threatening the very idea of university as the community of scholars engaged in cooperative search for truth.

After the introductory discussion, the symposium continued with sessions of lectures and discussions in three parallel sections in Croatian, English and German language. The large number of various topics and questions discussed in the sessions, some of which were considered in the introductory discussion, speaks for itself about the complexity of dealing with the idea of university. It is impossible to present here all the topics specifically, but some general outlines can be drawn. One part of the lectures was dedicated to historical development of the idea of university and analyses of thoughts on the concept of university by key figures who have shaped its modern understanding. Part of the presentations focused on the basic principles upon which modern universities have been established (autonomy, academic freedom, universality of knowledge and sciences etc.), particularly regarding the contemporary challenges to these principles. Valuable insights and experiences of institutional reforms and current situation at particular universities were shared by participants from different countries as well as different scientific fields, whose perspectives largely contributed to the quality of discussions. Special attention here was given to re-evaluating aims, scopes, advantages and possible or evident shortcomings of the most recent and most extensive set of university reforms gathered under the name of "Bologna process". However, the most prevalent subject of lectures, which can be seen as an indicator of the most pressing issue regarding contemporary discussions on the concept of university, was the relationship between university, state, and economy – specifically the dominant neoliberal imperatives which are rapidly advancing in the area of higher education.

In the evening of the first day, Mislav Kukoč (Split, Croatia) led a commemoration of the life and work of Nikola Skledar, the recently departed Croatian philosopher, cultural anthropologist and sociologist, one of the regular participants of the Days of Frane Petrić.

The second day of the symposium started with plenary lecture by Lev Kreft (Ljubljana, Slovenia), titled "University as Enterprise", in which he considered the issue of neoliberal trends of organising university as a kind of business enterprise. Three basic questions arise in dealing with this matter: first of all, is university an enterprise, can it become one, and should it become one? In attempt to provide answers to these questions, Kreft began by examining the very idea of university as a community of scientists and sciences in the quest of building universal knowledge, as well as challenges that have emerged with the deconstruction of this optimistic quest of modernity. Regarding the possibility of university to become enterprise, he emphasised the problem of confrontation of two missions, or in other words, two understandings of the role of university which simultaneously exist today. On the one hand, there is the mission of producing educated workforce for the labour market as well as scientific applications and know-hows requested by economy, and on the other is the mission of searching for knowledge for its own sake and producing scholars who pursue that ideal. The main problem is whether these two missions can actually coexist. This problem is particularly stressed in the neoliberal approach to university reforms which is marked by contradictions: it seems that neoliberal imperative of separating state and economy does not

apply in the case of university, where state is called to pressure university to become market oriented and to embrace managerial leadership. Efforts in the direction of turning public institutions into enterprises, argued Kreft, are just one aspect of the dangerous will to universalise profit as the only reason for human existence.

After the plenary lecture, the symposium continued with lectures in parallel sections, of which the students' section deserves to be highlighted, because students as an essential part of the university are frequently marginalised in the process of structuring and reforming higher education. Students from several Croatian universities presented not only their views on aims, roles and the very idea of university, but also provided interesting insights into aims and methods of recent students' protests within the extensive student's fight for the autonomy of university and publicly financed education. The afternoon was reserved for the organised excursion followed by open public lecture in the Frane Petrić Elementary School titled "Cyborgs Are among Us" by Igor Čatić (Zagreb, Croatia). In the evening, presentation of recently published books by the Croatian Philosophical Society was organised.

The last day began with one round of lectures in sections after which followed plenary lecture by Vladimir Paar (Zagreb, Croatia) on the role of basic knowledge in the 21st century university. Basic knowledge, under which he considers mathematics and fundamental natural sciences, has been the main motor of the immense technological development, and is of the utmost importance for economic and social developments as well. Present trends of reducing the extent of learning basic knowledge on all levels of education, justified by the aim of quick and effective production of skilled workers and relieving students of "unnecessary" workload, as Paar argues, thus create a potential danger of losing the creative force that drives the development of a society. The university's task is, therefore, to recognise the meaning and preserve the status of basic knowledge, especially regarding the increasing demands for interdisciplinarity and lifelong learning in society of the 21st century.

The final, closing discussion once again brought up the most relevant topics examined in numerous formal and informal discussions in the course of the symposium, and resulted in agreement to articulate conclusions in the form of a declaration, which is brought on the following pages. Although we can say that with this the symposium ended successfully, the various issues considered during three days still need to be resolved, and they will surely require future commitment through public debates and concrete actions. Bearing in mind that university is one of the fundamental pillars of modern society, the task is all the more important, because the way in which university is going to be developed will undoubtedly shape our future in general.

**Krešimir Babel**