

PRESENTATION

University Historiography: a Look at European Research and Results

Historiografía sobre universidades: una mirada a la investigación europea y sus resultados

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Over half a century has passed since the first coordinated international scientific initiative on the theme of the history of universities, the Congress of Historical Sciences in Stockholm in 1960, which gave rise to the International Commission for the History of Universities. And twenty five years since the start of the first collective project on the History of European Universities, which started in 1992 and was brought to a successful conclusion in 2011¹, it is certainly an appropriate moment to take stock of the research.

For this historiographic review, which coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the CIAN journal (*Revista de Historia de las Universidades*), a mosaic format, so to speak, has been chosen. It brings together papers by authoritative scholars from nine European states whose purpose is to offer a panorama of the research undertaken in their countries. With their heterogeneous analytical and interpretative schemata, these papers provide a very useful and wide-ranging survey of university historiography. It would be a most difficult, and perhaps superfluous, task to attempt to synthesize

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¹ Walter Rüegg (ed.), *A history of the university in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-2011), 4 vols.

them in this introduction. Thus, we shall limit ourselves to highlighting certain constants within this varied picture, and underline specific issues and themes, and pose questions rather than provide answers.

Initial observations are on method and concern the progressive emergence of this area of research and its distinct and specific nature. Certainly, it is generally agreed that this complex and, over the centuries, manifestly metamorphic historical subject has only relatively recently gained the attention of scholars. Rather, there are those who lament the fact that the history of universities has not yet given rise to a particular “genre” of historical writing (Kintzinger). In the traditional lines of historiography examined, the university appears somewhat subsumed under, and incorporated in, other fields of research: it is frequently identified with the history of the development of knowledge and therefore with the history of science in its various disciplines (Moulinier). Often, it is included in the field of education and schools and, being the final stage of education, it is at times studied largely by means of pedagogical approaches. In such cases, the accent falls on the teaching of literacies, and basic acculturation, which are seen to have a major impact on transforming society. At other times, universities appear in supporting roles in the history of political institutions. The university-political power relationship has therefore become a chapter in the general history of the evolution of State models. The advent of the modern State saw it assume and monopolize the formation of the intellectual and professional élites; “latecomer” States used the higher education system to start the processes of identity building and modernisation; and, finally, authoritarian and totalitarian States by means of ostracism and ideological intervention remodelled the university as an *instrumentum regni*.

Such a wide range of viewpoints has led to the convergence of diverse scientific competences in this field, from pedagogues to jurists, from philosophers to sociologists, whose principal methodological grounding is not precisely historical and whose research objectives differ. Are such crossovers risky or productive?

We know how weak the scientific statute of “History” is, and how far it allows enthusiasts in other trades to carry out shameless incursions into the field, often aimed at a “public use of history”. However, the fact that the history of universities is a history “open” to contaminations from other disciplines is, *de facto*, a favorable situation and fertile breeding ground for original developments. If need be, it can partner with the practice of an intelligent historiographic specialism, with no preclusions of sort, and with an epistemological and theoretical reflection on the specificity of the historical object “university”.

The studies included in the following pages chose to proceed by macro geographical areas and nations. It is a conventional choice, in a certain sense forced, and obligated in part, which connects, however, with another key theme in this field of study. That is its nature, which embodies the local, regional, national, international, supra- and transnational features of this history.

In such a polycentric evolution, the spatial and politico-institutional dimension on which universities are founded, and in which they compare themselves, has widened and narrowed throughout the centuries. Universities have witnessed great change from the cultural and religious *koinè* of Christian Europe to city contexts; from the Reformation, which divided both the European house² and universities, to interruptions brought about by wars and revolutions; from the nationalization of universities to their internationalization and the dynamics of the global university market in the contemporary period. University institutions of science and culture are set within a variable territorial geometry, and the periodization of such changes to their horizons is too an historical issue.

Therefore, only in part can the history of universities integrate correctly in national historiographies. However, it crosses over them to position itself more coherently in processes of a continental and even global scale. Conversely, it fosters different lines of development within a more limited regional context, as in the case of the United Kingdom and Ireland that finds Scottish and Irish specificities standing alongside the Oxbridge model (Anderson), or in the case of the Low Countries with the specificities of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg (Frijhoff). And then there is its fragmentation in the casuistic of university cities.

University historiography has therefore been constantly subject to the opposing tensions between long- and short-term, macro- and micro-analysis. Providing a detailed account of this research work by adopting a country-by-country approach is obviously only one of many possible solutions and, in each of the papers collected here, we find the above-mentioned dimensions intertwined. Indeed, all the papers have, as their common background, university historiography as an international phenomenon and underline the fact that its boundaries are mobile and changeable in time.

The recently established use of the transnational categorization is particularly suited to this area of study where the protagonists are both individuals and groups: students and scholars. Their identity cannot be defined solely or

² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

principally in virtue of their belonging to a national community, but in relation to different objectives of a cultural, scientific, religious, professional and social nature in an academic world whose boundaries do not correspond with those defined by national territories. Akira Iriye, whose definition of the requisites for a transnational history that he sets largely in the contemporary period³, presents a reality that universities have known throughout their history. Here, actors build their own exchange networks and bridges and their reciprocal interactions adhere to modalities and perspectives that differ from those of international, diplomatic, interstate relations. In this issue of CIAN, the transnational dimension, although not central, is anything but absent. One need only consider the *peregrinatio academica* during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age (Szögi); but also student and professor mobility in twentieth-century Europe; the dynamics of *cultural transfer* between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial empires; or, more recently, the Erasmus program, a major pillar of European Union education policy. And these examples bring into focus one of the most important aspects of a transnational history *longue durée* that certainly deserves more in-depth research and comparative analysis⁴.

Of the “genres” more widely used in the research commented on in the papers collected here, the anecdote and biography stand out as constants. These tributes to illustrious masters and schools provided not only scientific background from which scholars could draw inspiration, but also a means to strengthen and protect the name of their university. Much of this literature aimed at self-promotion and developing the myth of the origins of their university.

Despite certain methodological limitations, this work, alongside researches of a broader nature, provides a pool of scholarly information and inquiry on primary sources that is by no means insignificant. Centenaries, commemorations, anniversaries and festivals are, and will probably continue to be, inspiration for collective research initiatives in the university domain. Although varying in their value, they too are to be welcomed as they bring together energies and resources for further in-depth studies, new inquiries and new thinking.

These are also occasions that see the release of major publications of sources in the various contexts dealt with here. Such publications – statutes,

³ Akira Iriye (ed.), *A History of the World. Global Interdependence. The World after 1945* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁴ Christophe Charle, “Jalons pour une histoire transnationale des universités”, *Cahiers d’Histoire*, 121 (avril-juin 2013), pp. 21-42.

acta graduum, libri matricularum, repertories, etc. – are invaluable for saving fragmentary and deteriorating archival documents that risk being lost forever. In the same way, biographical dictionaries of professors and academic authorities, in the shape of accurate prosopography and not *clichés* in the shape, metaphorically speaking, of “ancestral galleries”, constitute indispensable tools in various contexts to open up new lines of long-term research.

Certainly, the trap of these *big projects* lies in what we may call monumental elephantiasis *aere perennis*, where, rather than being knowledge tools, become celebratory rather like statues idealizing history and isolate it as a *unicum*. However, the comparative perspective analyzed here provides effective antidotes to all this.

If these constants concern the past, at least in three methodological and thematic areas, the papers’ authors break new ground in detecting substantial new lines of research and openings for future developments: serial history, studies on the student world and student movements, and the female presence.

- a) Serial history. To say that the use of digital data processing and filing have to an extent revolutionized research on academic communities is, to all intents and purposes, a statement of the obvious in light of the numerous initiatives covered in the papers collected here. Initially started up within the confines of the micro-dimension of universities, and whose ripple effect has widened to the point of building up an interconnected European research network (Héloïse), studies founded on quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled by serial history are opening up new and far-reaching research paths and projects.
- b) The student world and student movements. The research was inspired by events of 1968 as the stage for an engaged youth generation (Taveira, Moulinier), and works by Dominique Julia, Jacques Revel and Lawrence Stone as historiographic paradigms⁵. In the case history of the “collective movements” of the late ‘60s, more than one author has drawn inspiration to set the student world in new light. A world long neglected by local and general historiogra-

⁵ Dominique Julia, Jacques Revel, Roger Chartier (eds.), *Les Universités européennes du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle. Histoire sociale des populations étudiantes* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1986-1989) 2 vols; Lawrence Stone (ed.), *The University in Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

phy, has been identified, instead, as a world in need of exploration and understanding (Moulinier). The various areas of this specific research include socio-cultural and statistical inquiry, student representative bodies, student *sociabilité*, important ties with the labor market, the formation of the élites and political ruling class, the identification of specific artistic languages such as music and the figurative arts, the analysis of protest movements, material history (accommodation, food), subjective history (feelings and emotions). These are all approaches that have as their focus the student condition and the study of the floating student population. Moreover, in the latter years of the twentieth century and the early years of this century, such approaches have been identified as heuristically productive and as important windows on the history of universities and civil society as a whole. (Carnicer).

- c) The female presence. The female university population – students, researchers, professors – constitutes another new viewpoint, and its slow emergence from curious anomaly to co-protagonist in academia, particularly for the contemporary period, is a specific area of research growing in importance.

From the historiographic reviews presented here emerge marked variations in the amount of coverage relative to the various periods in the evolution of higher education systems. Moreover, despite the passing of time, Jacques Verger's claim that «the middle ages are probably the best-known period in the history of French universities»⁶ is still relevant today and can be applied to all universities founded in ancient times. The Middle Ages are still the subject of the lion's share of research on universities, while the contemporary period continues to present 'blind spots' and shortcomings and increasingly more so the more recent the time period. After all, this is a structural problem of contemporary history: research on the more distant past accumulates, whilst the contemporary period with its "moving boundaries" makes it a never-ending pursuit requiring unexplored questions, issues, and spaces be addressed. However, in this area too, the comparing of models – for example that of universities under modern dictatorships (Fasora, Taveira, Pomante) – provides a stimulus in order to break silences, uncover ambiguities and stereotypes.

History as narrative, history as interrogative. The challenge is open.

⁶ Jacques Verger (dir.), *Histoire des Universités en France* (Toulouse: Privât, 1986).