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## Introduction

In 1904, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) received unusual lectures for himself to conduct at the University of Paris, namely a course in the History of education in France for future secondary school-teachers (Klierbard, 1995, p. 194). While preparing the lectures, he decided to reject the widespread view (then and sometimes even today) that the function of any course in professional education is “a question of simply instructing our future teachers in how to apply a number of sound recipes”. Durkheim also questioned the commonsensical assumption that because the past consists of a series of old mistakes, a study of the history of education can keep us from repeating those mistakes. He wrote about it not without a trace of irony: “Since the realm of errors knows no bounds, error itself can appear in an infinite variety of forms; a knowledge of the past made in the past will enable us neither to foresee nor to avert those which will be made in the future” (Durkheim, 1977, pp. 8–9). At best, historical awareness will keep us from repeating only a relative handful of that infinitude of mistakes—he said—just as the achievements of educational psychologists are not able to provide useful recipes for how to raise a child and avoid any mistakes.

Durkheim promised his class of future teachers that, as a result of their explorations into history of education, they would be able ultimately “to get away from the prejudices both of neophobia and neophilia: and this is the beginning of wisdom” (Durkheim 1977: 8–9). In other words, thanks to studying the history of education, students will learn not to fear the new and contemporary (neophobia), nor to delight in it uncritically (neophilia).

The value of studying the history of education lies in daring us to challenge the questions and the assumptions that our intellectual forbears have bequeathed to us. We study those assumptions in order to be able to relativize or even reject them. The same applies to educational institutions from the past.

The only medieval institution which had preserved its fundamental patterns and its basic social role and functions over the course of history was the university—one of the three acknowledged powers of medieval European society—*regnum*, *sacerdotium*, and *studium* (Rüegg, 2003, p. xix). The first, political power, has undergone profound changes. The second has preserved its structure, but it has lost the monopoly that it once possessed of being the instrument of salvation and the only source of moral norms. Some people think that the third power survived—a university *studium*, which still maintains a monopoly on conferring titles and degrees (similar to those in the Middle Ages: bachelor, licentiate, master, doctor) and creating among their owners, a permanent hierarchy of prestige. In this university *studium*, the medieval division into *artes* (humanities and sciences), law, medicine and theology, supplemented in Enlightenment by social sciences and technological studies, has survived to this day. This university *studium* still cultivates the notion that its libraries, laboratories and lecture rooms are the only places to acquire knowledge, and it sees itself as a privileged instrument for creating social elites.

Meanwhile, this third power—exercised until recently by universities—begins to share the fate of the other two, because due to the development of modern technologies, knowledge is now available everywhere and can be acquired at any time of day or night. Furthermore, competent teachers are present everywhere and learning is becoming increasingly individualized and personalized. Therefore, if the university as an institution wants to continue to play an important role in social life, it cannot cling to its medieval structures,

hierarchy and, above all, to faith in having a monopoly on knowledge and its transmission. It must not waste time and energy on multiplying bureaucratic regulations, calculating ECTS, and determining meticulously, learning outcomes—because then it becomes as anachronistic as the other medieval institutions: *regnum* and *sacerdotium*.

In 1902, the outstanding Polish mathematician Stefan Banach (1892–1945) became a lecturer in the mathematics department of the Lviv Polytechnic, despite having only completed two years of study. A year later, he was “insidiously” promoted to a doctor of philosophy from Kazimierz Twardowski in such a way that he did not even notice the promotion. “One day he was asked to the dean’s office, where—he heard—there are people waiting who have some mathematical problems and only he can help them solve them. Therefore, Banach went to the indicated room and willingly answered all questions, unaware that he was just passing a doctoral exam before a commission specially arrived for this purpose from Warsaw” (Urbanek, 2014, p. 34). The rhetorical question can be asked: why would such a situation be unthinkable in a modern Polish university? Why are regulations often more important than reliable knowledge?

We hope that reading texts from the history of higher education will become the beginning of this Durkheimian wisdom, leading to such a view on the role and structure of the university that it will make it an instrument of human support in a better understanding of the modern world. We are pleased to provide you with a volume containing the reflection of several authors on various aspects of university life. Let its reading be an encouragement for free and bold thinking.

## References

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