

LOCAL VS. GLOBAL, MODERN VS. POSTMODERN IN TODAY'S UNIVERSITY

"A Global Perspective For The 21ST Century"

One hundred and fifty years of healthy existence of the University of Wisconsin is, without any doubt, a demonstration of great resiliency. This longevity, of course, is inherited from the old founders in Bologna, Salamanca and Berlin, but it is our responsibility to keep the institution young. It is here, on fighting senescence, where my very ambitious title wants to make a plea.

I want to briefly propose that the University, as an institution, is in need of a major change in order to accommodate the demands created by tensions between postmodernity and modernity and particularly between the global and the local.

I need to take a most dangerous step by trying to define postmodernism or postmodern (much better the adjective than the noun, in this context) as that moment when we realize that the major triumph of modernism and its allied cartesian scientific method, was to make us aware that reality is an illusion (but, of course, it still pays to try to get there!). In other words, the postmodern moment is the most glorious moment of modernism which makes us realize that beyond the phenomenon,

that holds our attention and becomes the object of our scientific inquiry, there is a world of complexity which requires another method to re-unite what science efficiently separates.

Let's say, again, then, that the postmodern moment is one when we understand that photographing reality is a true utopia; that is, the conquest of reality is a never-ending process, because reality is a matter of meaning and meaning is contextual or relational, and therefore not universal.

There are many fundamental questions that we should ask regarding postmodernity and the university:

- ¿Can we go along, during postmodernity, with the same type of thinking as during modernity?
- Has the postmodern moment arrived to the university? Or the other way around, has the university arrived to postmodernity?
- What role shall the university play?
- What kind of science do we need now?
- If certainty has become old and nonsensical, what is the pedagogy of uncertainty?
- Would postmodernism push the university to moral relativism?
- Are faculty going to walk away from social criticism and politics?
- Would faculty rather recover the lost intellectual dimension of their job?

- What type of organizational structure would better suit the demands of postmodernity?

In many countries; certainly in my own, universities remain aloof in the context of the educational system, as if primary and secondary education were not part of the environment that they have to characterize and act upon. It is time for a new enlightenment, and where is going to come from, if not from the university?

Now, regarding the second tension, the local versus the global, an array of pressing questions emerge. Our major universities worldwide were born as a response to local needs, under the patronage of local powers; no matter how well known the institution may have become - the University of Wisconsin, for example - the institution finds its meaning and its congruency, as well as its patrons, in the local environment. Yet the local environment is not well served today unless networks and antennas are deployed globally. The tension arises when we ask who the constituency is and who the audience of the university. Are they all clients with the university becoming some sort of a multinational corporation? With excellence as its major spearhead? I might suggest with Bill Readings that the word "excellence" does not have a referent and therefore does not measure anything.

The same author in his book, "The University in ruins" suggests that the mission of the university is thought; I would add critical thought. We should ask what would happen to this goal in global universities competing for markets for their products and commodities?

If culture was the objective of the Humboldtian university, that is, the commitment with the nation-state or with the country, what is the compromise of the global university? What is the profile of a global liberal education? Would globality take us nearer to the unified knowledge of the Greeks and the *wissenschaft* of the Germans? Or would it take us further away on the road to greater fragmentation?

Will the new human being be tied to the global economy rather than to his/her local culture? Humboldt calls our attention to the need to keep philosophical work from becoming futile but also away from subservience to the practical utility demanded by the state. The question is who is the state now? It is clear that the global economy is the place where capital reproduces itself; is, then, the global economy the new master?

If one wishes to understand the ties between the university and the state, there are few examples as clear as the State and the University of Wisconsin, borne on the same day and conceiving the Wisconsin Idea very early on. But what's the idea now?

Finally, I would not be at rest if I did not mention, at least tangentially, that in spite of old universities and increasingly postmodern moments, our societies are suffering from global disconnection and global miseries; not only do my fellow Colombians destroy themselves, but also those in Yugoslavia and wherever innocent civilians become trapped in absurd wars promoted by militants, in either extreme. New questions arise: Are postmodernity and globalization only for enlightened

and economic elite, respectively? More specifically, is the internet going to be of any use to an illiterate world? Moreover, can the global university and post modern thinking, bring peace and opportunity for humans to continue their ascending journey? Definitely these issues have to be on the agenda of the global university.

My last call is to my fellow faculty members. For the sake of intellectuality, let's discuss these issues, its implications the values behind them. One of the major assets of the postmodern is the recognition of multiple and fluid identities and landscapes; but globalization tends to kill that diversity through the monotony of the market. Furthermore, if postmodernism does not offer a possibility for political action we, at the university, should become eclectics as necessary; that is, embracing postmodernism for reflection and social criticism for action through our intellectual power.