

Higher education in times of neoliberalism.

Brussels, Jean Monnet, November 2015 – Paul Verhaeghe

In 2012, I published a book on identity and more particularly on our contemporary identity. The book was based on a paper in which I had taken our own university as a case study. My main thesis is that our society has a very negative impact on our identity and that we need to change a number of things. Before going into that, I need to explain briefly how I understand identity.

Let me start with a personal question: who are you? This is an age-old question, and especially today, we find it quite difficult to give an answer. The fact that we find it difficult has to do with a totally wrong idea about what identity is. For a number of historical reasons, we think that our identity is some substantial, almost invariable essence deep inside of us, something that is innate, genetic, etcetera. I was myself right from the start, and give and take a few changes, I will remain myself for the rest of my days.

This is completely wrong, and the sooner you get rid of that idea, the better. The easiest way to demonstrate that this is wrong, is by thinking about adoption. A child born in Rajasthan, India, and raised in Amsterdam by Dutch parents, will become a Dutch lady. In case the same child would have been adopted by French parents and raised in Paris, she would have become a Parisienne. The reverse is also true, but more difficult to accept. If you yourself would have been adopted, as a baby, by a Sudan Muslim couple and raised in Khartoum, you would have developed a Sudanese identity, which is something totally different.

The first conclusion is that identity comes down to a construction, in which culture takes the predominant role. This brings us to two other questions: how is it constructed, and what is the content of this construction?

The 'how' question has been studied intensively. There are two processes at work: identification and separation. Identification is nowadays called mirroring, and that is a very apt way of putting it. Our parents and our family are mirrors that demonstrate and tell us who we are, what we have to do, what we can't do, etc. Our family mirrors the important things of our culture, locally, regionally, nationally etcetera. E.g. if you are raised in Ghent, you are different from someone who was raised in Antwerp. On a higher level, both of them are Flemish, meaning that they are different from a Dutch person. On an even higher level, we are talking about West-Europeans, who are different from an American, etc. And to be sure, this has nothing to do with race, think again about adoption.

So the first process is identification; identity and identification share the same Latin etymology, meaning *idem*, that is: sameness, similarity. We develop our identity by becoming similar to the other. The second process, separation, introduces difference. We become different, because from early age onwards, we can refuse certain identificatory models and prefer other models. As a result, we end up as an original recombination of those different mirrors.

Before entering the second question, the one about the content of our identity, I need to nuance the idea of model, because it might give you the wrong idea. Of course, a number of important people operate as a concrete model during our

personal development, but the most important model for our identity development is much less tangible. It is everywhere and nowhere in a culture, it is in the air we breathe, meaning that we are not conscious of it. We call it the discourse or the dominant narrative – those denominations give us a more operational idea, because identity is included in the words we use, in the language we learn. I will come back to our contemporary dominant discourse later.

Now, concerning the content of our identity, again, I have to correct our intuitive idea about who we are. In this age of individualism, we will answer that question with a number of personality traits, and soon enough we will discover that this is far from satisfactory. Our core identity consists of social relationships that define us on a number of key points. First of all, our gender identity: I am a man in relation to the other gender, I can only be a man in relation to a woman. Secondly, my generational identity: I belong to the older generation in relation to the younger one, or vice versa. This second relation might seem less important compared to the first one, but this is not the case, even on the contrary. This second relation defines my position towards authority, as it used to be associated with the elder generation. The third relation concerns the one with my equals, the people of my age, my gender, my colleague's etcetera.

Based on those three relations, it is pretty well possible to define someone's identity. Just think again about the adoption example: someone raised in a different culture with a different narrative will develop a totally different gender identity, with a different stance towards authority and towards his or her equals. If we want to summarize these differences, we are in for another surprise concerning the content of our identity: this has everything to do with norms and values, with do's and don'ts. Our identity is never neutral, it is an ethical construction that defines the way we behave to the other sex, to the authority and to our equal. And, again, this is determined by the dominant narrative or discourse in which we are raised.

To conclude this introduction: our identity is a construction, based on the dominant narrative of our culture that defines our basic relational stance towards the other sex, the authority and our equals. This is never neutral, but always ethically driven.

The result is that we are much more alike than we think – identity means that we are identical, based on the narrative or discourse that we share. This is beautifully illustrated by Monty Python, The life of Brian: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QereR0CViMY>

I can imagine that you are wondering about the place of genetics in all this. The answer is quite simple: on the level of the genes as such, there is no evidence that psychological identity might be genetically determined. But there is another form of heredity that is much more important in this respect. Evolutionary biology teaches us that we are social animals, meaning that we are meant to live in a group. If we find an individual belonging to a social species that is left alone, then there are only two possible answers: it is either ill or expelled from the group, and usually both. This is important, and we have to keep it in mind: we need the other.

Now, what does all this have to do with today's subject, meaning higher education?? To put it briefly, our contemporary identity is very different compared to the one of not that many years ago, because the dominant discourse has changed considerably. The university plays an important role in that respect, because universities do not

only provide a professional education. We must be aware of the fact that universities are very instrumental in developing and confirming the identity of their students. This has always been the case, but today, this is more the case than it used to be. First of all, because we have far more students than we used to have. And secondly, because the university itself has changed, as it has completely identified with the new dominant discourse.

My argument is that this bad both for the university and for the students, and that the sooner we change it, the better. First of all, I will briefly summarize this new discourse and the resulting identity – and do not forget that identity means social relations based on an ethical stance. After that, I will argue that the contemporary university has fallen victim to this discourse. And finally, I will argue why this is not a good idea.

Not so long ago, the dominant narrative was based on the interplay between at least four discourses: the political, the religious, the economic and the cultural, in which the political and the religious aspects were the most important. Today, they have all but disappeared. Politicians are fodder for stand-up comedians, religion calls up images of sexual abuse or suicide terrorism, and as for culture, everybody is now an artist. There is only one dominant discourse still standing, namely the economic. We live in a neoliberal society in which the whole world is one big market and everything has become a product. Furthermore, this is linked to a so-called meritocracy in which everyone is held responsible for his or her own success or failure – the myth of the self-made man. If you make it, you have yourself to thank; if you fail you have only yourself to blame. And the most important criterion is profit, money. Whatever you do must bring in the cash; that is the message.

The core idea of the neoliberal ideology finds its best illustration in the Human Resource style as it was developed in the Anglo-Saxon multinationals, e.g. the American ENRON-company. At the end of the nineties, they discovered that the best way to enhance their production and hence, their profit, was to install an all-encompassing competition, called *Rank and Yank*. The achievements of every employee were continuously measured and judged on a competitive base – this is the ranking aspect. Every year, one fifth of them – meaning those with the lowest production – were sacked after being publicly humiliated by having their name, photo and 'failure' posted on the company's website. And that is the Yanking aspect. If you still remember the Enron history, you know how it ended: in a major bankruptcy, based on fraud on every level.

We should have taken that failure as a warning, but unfortunately, we did exactly the opposite. The ENRON example testifies to a major shift in the way we are told to think about ourselves and about society. The fall of the Berlin wall was interpreted as the end of history and the end of ideology – freedom at last! What we did not see at the time, was that from that moment onwards the neoliberal ideology took over. Its baseline was aptly summarized by Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such a thing as a society. There are only individuals". She might have added: and the City. Within a decade, every human activity was organized in function of the market, based on the idea of competition between individuals. In this ideology man is seen as follows:

People are competitive beings focused on their own profit. This benefits society as a whole, because competition obliges everyone to do their best to

come out on top. As a result, we get better products and more efficient services within a single free market. This is ethically right, because whether an individual succeeds or fails in that competition entirely depends on his own efforts. So everyone is responsible for his or her own success or failure. Hence the importance of education, because we live in a rapidly evolving knowledge economy that requires highly trained individuals with flexible competencies. A single higher education qualification is good; two is better and lifelong learning a must. Everyone must continue to grow, because competition is fierce.

This is the dominant narrative with which we have been constructing our identity for the last 30 years. It is no coincidence that the most sold book in America, after the bible, presents an utopian society in which neoliberalism and the free market reign everything. This is *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. In this novel, selfishness is literally put forward as the most important virtue that makes the world better, whilst altruism is the biggest mistake someone can make. Again: this is the best-sold novel in the States.

From a certain point in time onwards, the neoliberal narrative has become so dominant that almost everyone considers it as a correct description of what we, humans, are, and how we must run our lives. Just to prove my point, I'll show you a key scene from a movie that was released in 1987, called "Wall Street". The main character (interpreted by M.Douglas) is a ruthless Wall Street player, and during a speech for the stockholders he explains how the world works – that is, how it works from a neoliberal point of view. As you will hear, It is rather easy to summarize: everything is based on greed. Notice that he makes a reference to the "evolutionary spirit"; I'll come back to that later. This is the conclusion of the speech:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vscG3k91s58>

This movie was intended as a cautionary tale against unchecked ambition and greed. The irony is that it had an opposite effect, and that the character played by Michael Douglas became an icon and an identification model for many young people entering Wall Street and the corporate world.

Indeed, the neoliberal mirror presents us with two dominant beliefs. The first one is that we ourselves are the key to our success. Everyone can make it, if he works hard enough. The second one is that life is an endless competitive struggle with the other guys who are also trying to make it. This is sometimes referred to as the "homo economicus" model.

The idea about the malleability of man is correct. As I explained in my introduction, our identity is a construction, and as such there are many possibilities. By itself, this is good news. The bad news is that the neoliberal interpretation has translated this into the command that we have to make "it", and that we are responsible for that. Perfectibility is possible, if you try hard enough: a perfect body, a perfect career, a perfect relation with perfect sex and perfect children. All this is just a matter of making the right choices, following the right training and doing your best. And in case you fail, you are the only one who is to blame. A typical neoliberal slogan runs as follows: "Happiness is a choice, failure is not an option". And for those of us who fail, there is little mercy, as their failure is their own fault.

This belief in total perfectibility dovetails with the second one: we humans are competitive creatures who are only looking for our own profit. This is our nature. Even more so, this *is* nature. At that point, there comes always a reference to the

evolutionary theory (remember the speech by Michael Douglas), with well-known expressions such as the struggle for life, the survival of the fittest. This is very important, because it creates the impression that the neoliberal perspective is scientifically sound and that people who contradict it, are just retarded.

As a matter of fact, it is the other way around. This interpretation of Darwin used to be known as social Darwinism, that is, the application of the evolutionary theory on social phenomena. In the previous century, it was used to justify colonialism and fascism, and as an argument against women's emancipation. Women, Jews, black people and the like were too weak, by nature, so the stronger races and gender just had to dominate them, which was considered to be their right, again, by nature.

This theory is wrong in many respects, but I will limit myself to its main mistake. The principle put forward by Darwin was that of the survival of the *fittest*. In social Darwinism, this is interpreted as the survival of the *strongest*. Social Darwinism disappeared because of its use by the Nazi's – it was their justification for the holocaust. The last thirty years has seen a revival of it, albeit that the term itself is rarely used; it is still too tainted. Instead of that, you will almost always find a reference to the work by Richard Dawkins. I'd better say: to the title of his most important book, namely "The selfish gene". Selection does no longer take place on the level of the group, no, selection takes place on an individual level, and selfishness is the main motive; that is the message. And again, it gives this ideology a scientific endorsement – *Look, even our genes are selfish! It is in our DNA!* If you are familiar with Dawkins' work, you will know that this is a completely wrong interpretation of his work. In an interview that he gave a couple of years ago to a Belgian newspaper, Dawkins said that he deplored the title, because of its misuse, and that he should have named his book "the altruistic gene".

These two beliefs are deeply anchored in the dominant narrative today, and as such, they determine our identity – meaning our relations towards the other, and our ethical position, because that is what identity is about. In the early stages of neoliberalism this narrative was limited to industry and trade, but today it dominates everyday life. The most ironic example in this respect are the so-called reality shows on television, from "The weakest link" over "Temptation Island" till "Top starter" and the like. They all present the same message: winner takes it all; man is a fiercely competitive animal looking for his individual profit. The irony is that these 'reality shows' pretend to show us who we really are, whilst they are dictating how we should behave.

Being academics, we think that we are far above those vulgar programs. This is not the case, on the contrary. Take a look at the contemporary mission statements of institutions for higher education; they are crammed with expressions such as 'competitiveness', 'innovation', 'growth', 'output financing', 'stakeholders', 'bench marking', 'excellence', 'top students', 'top researchers', and the like.

The message is clear: a normal human being is always looking for number one. And if someone voices a critique, he is considered to be a softie who does not know how the Real World works – Get real!

Is this true, is this really a correct reading of human nature? At this point, it is important to return to scientific findings. In my introduction I referred to the evolutionary biology. A crucial finding from the study of primates, especially by the Dutch biologist Frans de Waal, is that we are pre-wired for two different kinds of behaviors. On the one hand for cooperation and solidarity; on the other hand for competitive individualism and egoism. And there is an even more important conclusion from his research, namely that it is the environment that decides which behavior gets the upper hand.

Our contemporary neoliberal environment endorses only the selfish part, and that is not a very good idea, at least for two reasons. The first one is that it sets us apart, whilst we need the group, we are social animals. The second reason is that it creates unfair inequity between individuals, and apparently that is something that we cannot tolerate. There is a beautiful experiment by Frans de Waal that demonstrates our innate feelings for fairness. It is part of a larger study on reciprocity and empathy. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meiU6TxysCg>

He calls it “The Wall street” protest.

The most convincing illustration of the dominance of neoliberalism is its impact on our language. I will give you three examples. The first one is the use of the word ‘success’. We wish each other success all day through: success with your lecture, success with your job, success with your holiday, success with your new wife, with your baby, etcetera. Not so long ago, we used to wish each other good luck, or health, but that has disappeared. Success is the only criterion that counts.

A second example is the verb “to invest”. Today, we invest in everything, in education, in health care, etcetera. Take relations. If a couple divorces, the explanation is that they did not *invest* enough in their marriage. I find this a very ironic explanation, because the main thing about investment is that you have to diversify and that you need to change your investments all the time. Not so long ago, we would have talked about *commitment*. That word, and the accompanying ideas, has almost disappeared, it is way too soft.

My third example is the most painful one. In Belgium and in Holland, the invective that is most used by young children is “looser”. Our ten-year-old kids hurt other kids by yelling looser at them. And what is even more painful is that many twelve-year-old kids are already fully aware of the fact that they will never be able to make it; they have to consider themselves as losers even before their life has started. This says a lot about our contemporary society and the identities that it produces.

As I said in my introduction, our identity consists of social relations based on an ethical stance. The neoliberal narrative creates individuals who consider the other as a competitor, never to be trusted. Solidarity becomes an expensive luxury and its place is taken by temporary coalitions whose main purpose is to gain more from them than the other. Strong social bonds with colleagues are virtually excluded, and there is certainly no loyalty to the company or organization, and that goes for the university as well. As a result, a company cannot trust its employees and a mutual distrust is installed, in which both parties aim at getting the better deal. Cheating and fraud become normal strategies, as long as these are not discovered. Team spirit has become rare and needs to be boosted by team building weekends, ironically enough filled with survival of the fittest games.

This creates a negative spiral between individuals and organizations, which trust each other less and less as time goes by. Hence the exponential growth of registration and evaluation systems, contracts and cameras, checking on everyone and everything. The inevitable consequence of all this is a climate of fear and paranoia. In this respect, the typical defense mechanism of the intellectual is cynicism, reflecting the refusal to commit oneself. Indeed, commitment and trust are not part of the neoliberal picture, on the contrary.

After a number of years, because of the system itself, there emerges a clear polarisation between winners and losers. Furthermore, the losers are told that it is their own fault although their own experience has been of a steady loss of voice and autonomy. Opposite them there are the winners. The self-perpetuating nature of the system has to do with the preferential treatment accorded to the winners. In a relatively short time, it leads to a system of *winner takes all*, in which the middle group becomes steadily smaller and the gap between the top and the bottom grows ever wider.

This is the point where we have scientific evidence why a neoliberal society is bad, so this is quite important. It is always difficult to have a discussion about the qualities and the impact of an ideology, because in most cases, such a discussion is ideological by itself, meaning that the one ideology blames the other. In this case, it is possible to assess the impact of a neoliberal society. There is a general agreement that one of its effects is a sharp rise in income inequality. The middle group disappears because of 'the winner takes all'-system.

The rise of income inequality within individual countries, or even regions or cities, is something that can be measured. Long before Thomas Piketty, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, two British researchers, used it in their larger research project on the psychosocial quality of EU-countries. Using official statistics, they analysed the correlation between income inequality and a host of other criteria. Their findings are unequivocal: an increase of income inequity has far-reaching consequences for nearly *all* psychosocial health criteria. The conclusions are astounding, almost leaping off the page in table after table: the greater the level of inequality in a country or even a region, the more mental disorders, teenage pregnancies, child mortality, domestic and street violence, crime, drug and medication abuse, failure at school etcetera.

There is yet another surprising conclusion from their study. Most of us expect that income inequality hurts the underclass — the losers — while those higher up the social ladder invariably benefit. That's not the case: its negative effects are statistically visible in every social class; nobody escapes.

In the meantime, there is ample evidence that a neoliberal economy is very bad for the real economy as well, but I won't go into that.

To cut a long story short, the neoliberal narrative has turned us into a society of individual winners and losers. Again, I'd like to draw your attention to what I consider as its most negative effect. A neoliberal narrative produces lonely people who do not trust the other. The resulting social isolation goes against our nature, because we are social animals, we need the group. Left alone, either at the top or at the bottom, we feel bad, banished and ill. Neoliberalism has created a society that favors the worst part of our biological make-up, that is the egoistic part. But it doesn't make us happy, because we need the other.

The scientific findings bring us to our business, meaning the university. It is my thesis that most universities have fallen prey to the neoliberal discourse as well, and that this is bad both for the universities and for society. It is bad for the university because it destroys creativity and critical thinking. It is bad for society because it endorses a neoliberal identity in students.

What are my arguments? To be sure: my perspective is based on the changes that I have seen in Belgian and Dutch universities, based on the Anglo-Saxon model.

Not so long ago higher education was valued largely for its social relevance. The aim was to produce critical, highly educated citizens who would use their knowledge to the advantage of both themselves and society. Today the notion of serving society is hopelessly old-fashioned, and the word 'intellectual' has become an invective. The very ironic English title of a Dutch book expresses this quite clearly; the title runs as follows: "If you are so smart, why aren't you rich?" A university that produces intellectuals is an outdated institution that spills the good money of the Taxpayer without contributing to the Real World. Hence the changes that have been imposed the last two decades, in order to change academia in such a way that universities contribute to this Real World. The core of the new narrative is economic.

Here we meet with the effect on the identity of the students. The mission of the university is to equip students with the necessary competences so that they can enter the economic struggle for life. If you think I am exaggerating, just listen to a typical quote of the British Ministry of Higher Education coming from the Browne rapport published in 2010:

"Higher education matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity".

Obviously, departments for humanities, philosophy and literature do not meet that requirement; tripling the entrance fee rightly punishes the stubborn students still opting for those subjects. The lack of protest in most universities is equally disturbing: have we lost our critical abilities? Or worse, have we been brainwashed to such an extent that we ourselves are already taking these ideas for granted? To understand what is going on, we need to listen to our young academicians.

What is the message coming from them? They feel quite powerless and complain about the compelling effects of an invisible administration. They work flat out, but they don't find their jobs satisfying. They do not longer identify with the university, meaning that their commitment is very low. In the same movement, solidarity with colleagues from the own department and faculty has largely disappeared. The reason lies in the evolution of what started out as a sound meritocracy but turned into a neoliberal top down evaluation system.

This went as follows. In my university as in many others, during the last 20 years, the nuanced assessment of a researcher's qualities and efforts was systematically replaced by a system in which their production — or 'output', as the new jargon has it — was literally measured and counted. Things that were too difficult to measure were left out of the picture. It is no coincidence that I am talking about a researcher. The importance attached to teaching plummeted, with the focus shifting

almost exclusively to research and 'projects'. A bottle-factory mentality came into being, in which academic publications were the unit of production. The output.

As a consequence of the system itself (that is: a closed system with people competing with each other), the bar was continually raised. The first step was that publications in Dutch no longer counted; to qualify they had to be international. A few years later, 'International' proved to be a euphemism for 'English'. Next, the focus shifted from English publications in general to a handful of top journals (known as A1 journals), then to the impact factor and the citation indices. An academic who wants to build a career must publish in journals with the highest international (that is, Anglo-Saxon) ranking and needs as much citations as possible. The most recent change is that researchers need to have publications in the top quarter of the A1 journals, forget about the other three other quarters.

There is nothing coincidental about this type of evolution. On the contrary, it is structurally determined and thus inevitable. A neoliberal meritocracy can only function through a centrally directed and rigidly planned system that measures 'production' and individual contributions to it. The nature of the system limits the number of 'winners'; only the most productive gets the first prize, and the others are asked to leave.

In corporate life, this is brutally implemented. I will show you an extract from a movie, where a manager visits his local salesmen, because the sales have dropped. The way in which he 'motivates' them is typical for a Rank and Yank society. In the academic world, the same thing happens, but it is less open and hence, it is more hypocrite.

"Glengarry Glen Ross" (1992)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kZg_ALxEz0

The first price is a Cadillac, the second price a set of steak knives, third price you're fired. In most universities that I know, every appointment or promotion entails a fierce competition, with career growth being an option only for a few. The first price is tenure; the second price is you're out. The message is: 'Up or out'. A cutthroat contest ensues, which in turn causes the criteria for success to be tightened yet further. The same competition takes place on a larger scale, between the institutions as such, leading to all kinds of mythical rankings for universities. These take on the quality of a stock market rating, causing deans and administrators sleepless nights.

This is the academic version of the Rank and Yank system, and the consequences are the same as in the corporate world: the production continues to increase on paper, but the quality goes down; we have never seen that many PhD's, but most of them are quite banal. On the academic work floor, there is an increasing atmosphere of personal frustration, envy, fear, and even paranoia. The most detrimental effect on the academic world is that creativity is effectively stifled. Anything that doesn't fit within the rigid parameters doesn't count anymore. Everything that counts is reproduced endlessly.

This has to do with an unexpected side effect of the evaluation systems. The administrators assumed that their evaluation systems would present them with an objective image of academic reality. What they did not understand is that these measurement systems would have a determining effect on the professional behaviour of those who are evaluated. Instead of a measurement system, it has

become a steering system. Today, the professional behaviour of young researchers is determined by the question whether a particular behaviour is taken into account for their ranking or not. It doesn't take long for the most ambitious ones to know the ropes. A1 publications are everything. So, choose only short-term research; long term research, well, it just takes too long. Choose sexy research themes and research methods, and follow the hypes (in human sciences, everything with 'neuro' in it, sells). Make sure that you quote the right people, because more often than not, they will be the reviewers of your paper. Never present negative research results, the chance of rejection is too high. Forget about new research themes or methods, stick to the dominant paradigm.

Consequently, thinking out of the box, which is a precondition for innovation and discovery, has become virtually impossible. If you want to get that research grant, if you want your paper published, you have to learn the lingo, you have to identify with the dominant criteria, otherwise forget it.

It's worth referring here to the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault and his theory on discipline: in the current academic world, everyone gets bent under the yoke of an anonymous, global Evaluator, who looks down from the Mount Olympus of the top journals, disciplining all and putting them in their rightful place. Fearful of his Jovian eye, no one dares protest. So, the whole circus continues, until it will collapse from the inside.

In matters of research, this collapse is already happening. Paradoxically enough, this quality-monitoring system fosters fraud, just as in the case of the Enron multinational. A Dutch professor of social psychology, by the name of Diederik Stapel, was an authority in his field, renowned for his extensive empirical research and numerous publications in top journals. But his career came to an abrupt end when it turned out that he had fabricated and manipulated data on a massive scale. The conclusion of the official investigation is appalling. In summary: this fraud cannot be reduced to an unethical individual, no, it is the result of a research culture that has elevated quantifiable criteria for success to a goal in itself. This research culture has more in common with the commercial world than with a university. Another example comes from Germany. In August 2009, a mass fraud with doctoral titles came to light, in which various universities and hundreds of professors were involved.

Meanwhile, besides these instances of actual fraud, a much greater problem looms: the bulk of research findings are either banal or false, and that, too, is entirely down to competition and the ensuing pressure to publish. Scientists and academics aren't given enough time these days to investigate issues properly. This is the message given by John Ioannidis, a renowned epidemiologist at Stanford University, who wrote a pioneering article on this subject in 2005 entitled *Why Most Published Research Findings are False*. Six years later, he did a follow-up study, and he had to conclude that nothing had changed (lecture at Radboud University Nijmegen in April 2011).

Fraud and sloppy science testify to the collapse in the research department. In matters of teaching, the irony is that the collapse is presented as a success. Students are no longer considered to be students; they are clients. As a client, they have a contract with the university for which they pay good money, so they have every right to expect a return on investment. Meaning the right to expect their degree. If they don't get it, something must be wrong with the institution and the teachers, so students will fight their results in case it does not meet their expectations. Soon

enough, teachers and institutions will be sued, and the complaint of the student will be settled in court. For the teachers, this is a double whammy. On the one hand, they are themselves continuously evaluated by the students. On the other hand, teaching as such is not really important for their academic career; the only thing that counts is research and publications. Consequently, they keep the students happy and stupid with power point and prezis presentations. The once dreaded examinations are replaced by the writing of papers based on copy/paste from the internet or by multiple-choice exams. The result can be summarized with a quote coming from Alice in Wonderland: `EVERYBODY has won, and all must have prizes'. In Belgium, the government endorses this expectation, because universities receive an output financing. The more degrees we deliver, the more money we get. And we do deliver them; the numbers are growing every year.

I have to come to my conclusion.

As far as universities are concerned, if the current neoliberal trend continues, two potential scenarios emerge. The first one is the aim of the British ministry of education, putting universities at the service of a neoliberal economy. In that case higher education will become a research centre for multinationals — a cheap one, being funded from the public purse — with the added bonus of turning out graduates whose identity is already mirrored to the neoliberal ideal.

The other scenario is that universities will simply be bought up and transformed into corporate companies whose sole aim is to make money. Their input (students) and output (employees) will depend of the powers at work in the so-called free market forces.

If we study the history of the academia, it is easy to make a differentiation between times when universities were truly innovating and times when they were at the service of the dominating powers, be they religious or ideological. Today, higher education is at the service of a neoliberal economy that even in matters of economy doesn't work.

And now finally for the good news: things are changing. The economic crisis caused by the neoliberal ideology is functioning as a wake-up call. A growing number of people are becoming aware of its negative effects. We need an alternative, and in the best of cases, the universities might take a leading role in the development of an alternative way of thinking.

The first thing that we need to convince ourselves of is that higher education does not need any extrinsic justification, let alone one based on a return on investment. On the contrary, we need to reverse this perverse reasoning where everything is measured in terms of economic return. It should be the other way around: economic growth must provide us with the means to do things that we consider important by themselves, such as education, health care and art. Their intrinsic effects are not of a quantitative nature, meaning that they cannot be measured; they can only be judged in a qualitative way. Higher education is a public good, not a market-driven product.

Once we have convinced ourselves – and the politicians – of this intrinsic value, we can start with a much-needed cleaning job. We need to rewrite all the documents concerning higher education of the last two decades – as long as these documents use economic mumbo jumbo such as 'mission statement', 'benchmarks',

'skills', 'competitive', 'fostering growth', 'excellence', 'user satisfaction', output', we are alienating ourselves to a purely instrumental discourse that is detrimental to the very idea of higher education.

Once this cleaning is done, the academicians will be free to do their job again, instead of trying to prove that they are doing it. Our main task is "to understand and to extend the intellectual, scientific and artistic heritage of mankind and to hand this heritage to subsequent generations" (Collini, S., 2012). The main values belonging to this task are easy to define: trust, shared commitment, genuine autonomy in combination with cooperation and the pleasure of finding things out – incidentally, these values are the counterpart of the neoliberal ones.

By way of conclusion, I want to go back to my initial thesis. Our contemporary identity is the result of a particular economic narrative that dominated our thinking and hence our life these last thirty years. Its effect on teaching in general and higher education in particular is obvious. What we are less aware of, is that this discourse has changed our value system as well. It privileges the worst part in our biological make-up, that is selfish competitiveness, and it destroys the best part, that is solidarity.

It is time to reverse this situation, otherwise we might end in what Thomas Hobbes described as *Bellum omnium contra omnes*, the war of all against all. Such a reversal will not be easy, because it requires a change in our way of thinking about ourselves and our relations to others. It took thirty years to install our neoliberal identity; I hope it will take less time to change it. In retrospect, we can see that it started in the corporate world with a particular kind of human resource management; higher education and health care were the last bastions to be taken. It is my hope that this time, higher education will be the starting point for change.

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