



Renzo Rosso

The Decline and Renaissance of Universities

Moving from the Big Brother University
to the Slow University



Springer

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Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement.

Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988

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Grateful thanks are due to all my students who endured me with patience and mildness. They gave me back more than I have given them. And the single greatest cause of happiness is gratitude.

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About the Author

Renzo Rosso has been a Professor at the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy, since 1986. He received the Borland Award for Hydrology in 2005 and the Henry Darcy Medal from the European Geosciences Union in 2010 for his research contributions to water science and engineering. He has been an advisor to national and international scientific agencies, an elected member of the Academic Senate and the head of the Faculty of Environmental Engineering at the Politecnico di Milano, and director of an interuniversity Doctoral Program in Water Engineering and of an International Master's Program in Water Resources Management. The author of 8 research books, 3 university-level textbooks, 5 essays, 1 novel and over 400 papers (more than 100 in SCI journals) in the fields of hydrology, water resources, river engineering, climate and glaciology, fluvial geomorphology, reliability analysis, stochastic processes, nonlinear dynamics and fractals. His current activities include science and higher education communication as a columnist for national newspapers and magazines.



Culture is not a well-stocked warehouse of news, but it is the ability that our mind has to understand life, the place we hold, our relationships with other men.

Antonio Gramsci

The ninth centennial of the oldest university in the Western world, the *Alma Mater Studiorum* or the *Universitas Bononiensis*, fell 30 years ago. It was 1988, and on that occasion, the rectors of almost 500 European universities met in Bologna to sign the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, the solemn summa of the European principles of knowledge.¹ From then on, these principles were to have addressed educational policies. After six decades, have the universities, European or otherwise, moved in the wake of these principles?

I am not really sure. During the last 30 years, the traditional model of universities, under allegation because of being old-fashioned and inadequate, has been demolished. This was replaced by a more “modern” model, in tune with global markets and its needs. Is it a good outcome for humanity? Has the new model kept its promises? And does it respond to the needs of the future? This essay rejects the positive answers—often taken for granted by both experts and ordinary people—to these three questions.

¹One must not confuse the *Magna Charta*, signed in Bologna in 1988, with the Bologna Declaration in 1999, i.e., the Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on June 19, 1999. The latter is the main guiding document of the Bologna process, adopted by ministers of education of 29 European countries in order to establish a European Higher Education Area in which students and graduates could move freely between countries.

The idea that inspired this book comes from a paper² by David West published by demosproject.net and a collection of essays on the subject of academic tenure,³ published by a scientific journal that zoologist Ferdinando Boero sent me. Cries of pain that have flooded a glass already full, exceeding the threshold of addiction and retreat. The brilliant book published by Federico Bertoni on the Italian university crisis,⁴ of which I subscribe to every page, keeps me from lingering on the incidents of my country, always poised between the farce and the tragedy; thus allowing me to lengthen our gaze on the planet. As I adhere to many arguments by Juan Carlos De Martin⁵ in his effort to design a less somber academic future than the present grieving.

To them all, I owe the starting ideas for the reflections of this essay, initially entitled “Big Brother University.” This title was taken from the name of the occult antagonist of the prophetic novel by George Orwell.⁶ Then I discovered, while surfing the web, that the idea was not original at all, after the first editions of the reality show conquered the sofa audience and oriented most university reforms of the new millennium. Many columnists and scientists shared this metaphor. Not only was “Big Brother in the Academy” the title of a Jack Grove’s article published by Times Higher Education in 2014, but several authors had married George Orwell’s dystopia to paint the evolution of universities in different countries, climates, and cultural skies.⁷ All contributions aimed at deepening above all the question of transparency and the role of technology in controlling the system. Let alone that someone had also created a casual wear brand: *Big Brother University, established in 2009*.

The current academic dystopia does not only deal with transparency and technology but is more complex as Orwell’s visionary fresco shows a surprising capability to represent today’s reality in its various facets, as it describes both the practice and the cultural foundations of the modern university. Privacy threatening and telematics intrusion are the façade of the prison that jails the universities. One can replace the dominant social system, which Orwell identified in contemporary socialism, with the current one; and every page of “Nineteen Eighty-Four” acquires a fantastic capability to describe the complexity of the university system that has imposed itself everywhere in the last 30 years.

Reflecting on the multifaceted consequences of the dystopia that has been conquering the universities, the hardest ones are the triumph of conformity, the

²West, D. (2016) The Managerial University: A Failed Experiment? “Demos,” April 14

³AA.VV. (2016) Academic freedom and tenure, “Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics,” Vol. 15: 1–5

⁴Bertoni, F. (2016) *Universitaly. La cultura in scatola*. Bari: Laterza

⁵De Martin, J.C. (2017) *Università futura. Tra democrazia e bit*. Torino: Codice Edizioni

⁶Orwell, G. (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg

⁷Chomsky, N., Academic Freedom and the Corporatization of Universities, Talk at the University of Toronto, Scarborough, April 6, 2011. Swain, H., In the library in the gym, Big Brother is coming to universities, “The Guardian,” January 19, 2016. <https://iso.org.nz/2017/05/28/oppose-big-brother-university/> (April 18, 2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NpSVu0o-00 (April 19, 2018)

decay of creativity, and the loss of academic freedom. I emphasize the need to save this precious good. Not just for professors like me, who perhaps do not deserve so much grace, but for both the students and for ordinary people: today society lacks the awareness that the loss of academic freedom prefigures the loss of freedom on the part of everyone.

I do not deny that this book presumes to awaken some academic from lethargy and submission to the radical changes that have upset the universities, thus polluting a millennial mission. Edgar Morin wrote that:

we are experiencing a crisis of civilization, a crisis of society, a crisis of democracy, into which an economic crisis entered, the effects of which exacerbate the crises of civilization, society and democracy. The crisis of education depends on other crises, which in turn also depend on the crisis of education.⁸

It is the accurate description of a complex system, dominated by wicked feedback effects. A period of human history in which modernity has been declined by power in a sneaky and subtle but total and extreme way, with tones and shapes that neither the Protestant reform nor the Counter-Reformation or the Enlightenment, the many fascisms and communisms were able to do. I immediately ask the reader to forgive my excessive arrogance, when in the final pages I try to outline a different goal, trying my hand at utopia.

Some indications of a feasible crisis of “modern” universities, as reshaped on the prototype of commercial enterprises, are already visible. Let us observe the rapid overturn of the trajectory of the modernist revolution. After the creative evolution—all aimed at sanctifying the paradigms of economic efficiency and effectiveness along a futuristic path under the paradigm of speed—the university is progressively wrapping itself up. The bureaucratic involution introduces rigidity that in the long run will fail to meet the requirements of globalization, the beacon that displayed the route in the last 30 years. This regression can lead to the decline of the “modern” academic paradigm, as life is full of uncertainty as well “we always run in one direction, but what is its meaning nobody knows⁹”.

The road to build a “new” model, by all means alternative, with a focus on education of citizens and progress of knowledge, are impervious. The new university can sprout up with struggle, among a 1000 inconsistencies, after hard labor and multiple trials and errors, but culture and education will be the essential gears to face with the clash against the physical limits that the history of the Earth will sooner or later put in front of mankind without making discounts.

Will the *Slow University* be able to play the role of the substitute paradigm for the *Big Brother University* archetype, the current *Fast* model? It is not an impossible mission.

⁸Morin, E. (2014) *Einsegnen à vivre. Manifeste pour changer l'éducation*. Paris: Actes Sud/Play Bac

⁹Guccini, F. (1972) *Incontro*. In: *Radici*. Milano: Emi Italiana