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Sturdier than myths: the re-thinking higher education in the 21th century by a fearless humanist

Sometimes long books make simple points that have large consequences. Jonathan Cole's *Toward a More Perfect University* is that kind of book. The title is quintessentially American, reflecting continuing themes in the history of the United States, building "a more perfect Union", a phrase from the preamble to the American Constitution in 1787, reiterated by Barack Obama in 2008. It is hard to imagine a European reaching for such phrase.

Jonathan R. Cole is, not surprisingly, an American, who was a keynote speaker at the second Central European Higher Education Cooperation (CEHEC) Conference in June 2016. One of the outstanding sociologists of our times, he has also written much celebrated and always respectably thick books about higher education. Professor of sociology at Columbia University in New York, for fourteen years he served in several high-level administrative positions at Columbia (provost, dean of faculties, vice president for arts and sciences). His scholarly work has focused on the sociology of science, but recently he has turned to the search for a better understanding of universities.

Like many Americans, Cole had rarely travelled to and had never written about Central Europe. His higher education books are all strictly and exclusively (even painfully) about the United States. Why then invite him to a conference about the Distinctiveness of Central European Higher Education? The answer is simple: *Toward a More Perfect University* is an extraordinary piece of scholarship, displaying a uniquely fecund approach to understanding higher education in our times globally. The book puts forward surprising,

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daring, but also perfectly feasible solutions for the university to better, or even fully, fulfil its potential.

Cole raises the question of how the true potential of American research universities can be realized. How can a good institution be made better, even perfect, or more perfect? He explains, first, why the American research university is a great institution. And he does this by going beyond what many scholars, politicians and the general public believe: he explains what is beyond the “myths” of the great American research university. Having clarified greatness, he then identifies and analyses the challenges, both external and internal, and imperfections of this model.

Unlike most writers on American universities, Cole avoids both simple celebrations of accomplishments and lamentations about failures. He is an engaged, even fearless scholar, writing in a by now long-forgotten humanistic tradition, at a time when ideological or technical specialization dominates higher education scholarship. What makes his book quite unique (a word he rightly despises) is that he identifies essential, sometimes unseen, problems but, at the same time, puts new ideas that are disarmingly commonsensical, making them, at least apparently, feasible. These are ideas and solutions covering a wide array of “heavy” topics, from admissions principles and policies to governance, from the content of undergraduate education to the core values of research universities, and from redesigning spaces suitable for collaboration to the funding of higher education. The discussion is neither arid nor abstract. Both the problems and the solutions are abundantly illustrated with examples, real life examples, sometimes personal stories, adding to the humanistic feel of the book. In this way, the book becomes about real humans, real people, rather than being about ideas or institutions.

One might wonder whether the book is relevant for a Hungarian or Central European reader interested in higher education. After all, European and American higher education differ in several ways, and often severely so. For example, the continental European higher education is more fragmented and less stratified than the U.S. The elite European universities are for the most part a strange mixture of the research university model and heavy state-infused bureaucracy. Although the book is explicitly about the great American university – this is exactly the title of Jonathan Cole’s earlier book – it is still very relevant for Central Europe. That is because the book discusses a model, or “the” model of university, applicable in reality beyond any American parochialism. Moreover, all our debates regarding trends, challenges and possible solutions in Central Europe’s higher education, almost always refer back to the American experience, even when not explicitly acknowledged. As such, it is quite illuminating to examine some key issues potentially relevant for Central European readers.

Take, for example, Cole’s discussion of admissions and enrolment. American research universities are highly selective, sorting through over 30,000 applicants for 2,000 places. The procedure to admit them requires students to achieve high test scores in all fields. This practice places extraordinarily talented and dedicated students, but who are not

narrowly focused on getting good test scores, at a disadvantage. There is no way this process can be fair. Therefore, Cole suggests as an alternative method, surprisingly and bravely, a lottery among those who have the best, roughly equal results, leading to a more diversified student body. He also urges to interview candidates and involve academics in the final round of selection, rather than leaving the selection to the admission staff.

This whole admission process will look foreign to Europeans. European institutions are generally less selective than their American counterparts, because higher education systems are less hierarchical. Nonetheless, there is strong pressure on European higher education systems to become more differentiated vertically (i.e. diverse excellence initiatives). Cole effectively challenges Europe's whole taken-for-granted admissions process of depending upon grades achieved or single tests, a system which discriminates against those highly talented students who are not consumed with grades, terribly narrowing the spectrum of those who would make excellent university graduates.

Cole's discussion of undergraduate education and the role of humanities will seem more familiar. Cole stresses, against other authoritative voices and dominant trends on campuses today, that "the curriculum should be unsettling" for students, challenging their biases, assumptions and beliefs (no "safe space"!). It should encourage students to be active (co-)creators of their own knowledge rather than mere passive recipients. It should allow students to follow their own pace and decrease the temptation of premature overspecialization. He adds, against other dominant narratives, that "it would be a great mistake if we allowed politicians and a few outspoken businessmen to dictate educational policy and restructure our curricula so that it conforms to their ill-advised premature professionalism" (p.87). Cole talks about the on-going debate on the usefulness of social sciences and humanities (a debate that is widely known in Hungary, Central Europe, and the larger Europe). He criticizes elected officials for not understanding what humanities offer to students, that is, to develop more acute critical learning and analytic skills, and forcing us to question our own biases.

These issues are certainly not strange in the recent evolution of European universities. Questions about what knowledge is valuable in the 21st century and how might teaching be improved are increasingly being raised. While these debates will likely intensify as technology and the rapid transfer of information increases, Europeans will still be left with the difficult problem of viability, when new approaches require interested students with strong internal motivation, which might be taken for granted in highly selective institutions, but not in all institutions, especially those that are less selective.

The question of whether the proliferation of professional schools (law, medicine and business) undermines the centrality of the core arts and sciences disciplines resonates well in our part of the world. In most universities (even in Hungary), resource constraints result in decentralized budgeting, meant to create incentives to increase revenues. Professional schools have much higher potential for that, compared to arts and humanities, leading to increasing inequality among faculties. The problem is also

apparent in the United States, leading Cole to argue that professional schools must collaborate more extensively with humanities and sciences.

American higher education debates are overwhelmingly dominated by funding. By European standards, U.S. research universities are incredibly wealthy. So, why do tuition fees increase faster than the overall rate of inflation from year to year? According to Cole, this phenomenon “is as complex as interpreting American tax code”, and yet he provides several explanations: the economic value of higher education is not truly acknowledged in society, resulting in less than desired public funding. Cole cites the example of the University of Michigan, which received 78% of its budget from the state in 1960, while in 2012 the state funded only 17%. We can see how universities move “from state-supported to state-assisted to state-located seats of higher learning”. By comparing tuition fees to the cost of military bombers and drones, Cole remarks that these are “questions of values as much as finances”. Cole mentions several other problems as well: the lack of incentives and the inability of institutions to reorganize and abolish not-performing and outdated units; the budgeting processes in institutions and finally the effect of cost disease⁴ in education. Many of these phenomena are similar in most universities around the world.

One mechanism to counterbalance rising costs is an expansion of MOOCs. Cole acknowledges that MOOCs have a lot of merits, but he is sceptical regarding the extent to which they will transform universities, because students need community exposure for conversion and for network-building. “If nothing else will save residential college, sex will”, he adds. On the other hand, several insightful examples are cited on how technology can involve students in learning and research, but this will not override the traditional paradigm of face-to-face interaction of teachers and students. On the whole, this could be good news for European institutions, which generally lag behind the American MOOC providers, although European universities may find us left behind by entrepreneurial efforts to reach large numbers of students in effective ways.

Universities, Cole believes, have to find new ways to work together and simultaneously retain their commitments to academic values, which perhaps more than anything else distinguishes universities. No one really gains from the intense competition and rivalry that dominate U.S. research institutions. By creating “academic leagues”, that is, international networks of institutions in particular teaching and research programs, it is possible to share the best teachers, the best courses (on a formal or informal basis) and, of course, continue with the increasing amount of research now being undertaken cooperatively across national borders. Increasing cooperation between institutions would be beneficial in Hungary as well, but it is easier said than done. In fact, there is very little as yet. For example, since the introduction of the two-cycle (and later on three-cycle)

⁴ The theory of cost disease states that the advancement of technology affects labour intensive (stagnant) sectors (such as education, health care) differently than capital intensive (progressive) sectors (i.e. industry) because technology cannot replace human labour as efficiently in stagnant sectors. In progressive sectors wage increase is in line with productivity. In order to remain competitive, wages in stagnant sectors also increase leading to increased costs (and higher tuition fees) but without increased productivity.

system in Hungarian higher education, there has been a considerable increase in international mobility, but national mobility (studying a semester at another Hungarian institution) has remained on a very marginally low level, simply close to zero.

At a time when academic values are being threatened around the world, Cole is forthright in both calling for their defence and placing them in a hierarchy. The most fundamental values are academic freedom and trust on which other essential values, like integrity in research and the peer review system are built. Others, like diversity and intellectual progeny, are desirable but nevertheless are less important.

In Cole's opinion, the other fundamental value, trust (confidence in individuals or institutions that they will fulfil their obligations) is a sine qua non of research universities because without that even freedom of inquiry would be jeopardized. He also mentions that "from time to time ... the United States has witnessed (in varying degrees) a breakdown of trust. In most developing nations, of course, the protection and autonomy of universities from state powers simply doesn't exist. Today, we are at a time when trust between the two partners has eroded significantly."

The breakdown of trust is manifested in the overregulation of institutions "in the name of accountability". Increased bureaucracy and compliance prevent institutions from fulfilling their mission. Cole admits that institutions are partly responsible for this situation because they do not regulate themselves when they meet inappropriate behaviour by one of their staff or students. Moreover, state and federal governments often create regulations and burdens for every institution based on one single incident.

Trust is an essential question not just in the U.S., but in all higher education systems and it is especially important in Central European countries, which suffer from the legacy of mistrust in the state and in public institutions. In Central Europe, the state is traditionally the main source and enforcer of regulations. The issue of university autonomy is important, and realities on the ground in this area are increasingly depressing. Would self-regulating be a solution? Another matter to think about in this part of the world.

For Cole, this rethinking requires a new compact between the government and institutions, warning at the same time, that "distrust is difficult to overcome and virtually impossible if one of the two partners is not interested to change policy and restore the partnership that once existed". The concept of this compact could be very productive for research in higher education in Central Europe, giving both the strong role of the state and the drastic evolution (not to say alteration) of this compact in the last several years. While Cole identifies the important, but understudied problem of trust, much research has to be carried out in this field so that other alternatives to rebuild trust can be suggested.

The final chapter of Cole's book is dedicated to institutional reforms, more explicitly on how the composition of boards and governance mechanisms should be changed, how a

more centralized resource allocation could facilitate collaborations among faculties, how we should restore the balance between teaching and research and what the conditions of evolutionary and revolutionary changes are (illustrated by several examples). While his suggestions may seem too American for Central Europe, the issues themselves have come to the fore over more than two decades of reform efforts.

Toward a More Perfect University does three main things: first it provides new knowledge, information, and analysis on universities in America; second, it proposes concepts and heuristics on how to understand and how to interpret the issues it discusses (like “compact” or “trust”); and third, it puts forward extremely appealing suggestions and recommendations. When providing new knowledge, the author does it through a constructive “deconstruction of myths”. He mentions, for instance, that it was public funding that made American private research universities great (we in Europe usually think research in private universities in the US thrives on private money, which is false). Another myth it deconstructs is the belief that there is clear ranking of students at admissions; in reality the admission process at many large universities is more random and less equitable than one would assume.

In terms of heuristic tools, Cole talks about the “compact” of universities and governments. There was a sort of similar compact between national authorities, governments and universities in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the communist regime: universities were considered part of the national project, they were invited to discuss directions in specific countries - Hungary, Romania, Poland – should evolve. That is changing recently, with governments formulating the national project, while universities either not having a role or having the subordinate role of implementing the national project.

To sum up, Jonathan Cole provides a comprehensive view and a brave criticism of American research universities. His suggestions are sometimes personal and therefore debatable (e.g. the value system) or underdeveloped (rebuilding trust, cooperation between institutions). At first look, some of them may appear even as naïve, because they are simple and brave. They all refer to valid problems and therefore they are able to generate genuine debates. This is, in fact, what the author hopes to achieve: generate a new debate on the role, functions and activities of universities. And by drawing our attention to the whole, rather than losing ourselves in the details, the book can revitalize the fading discussion on the role and mission of higher education even in Central Europe because major problems identified in the book are valid not just for American research universities, but for all developed higher education systems and research universities all over the world.