

The Council of Europe, the Bologna Process, and Education for Democracy

An Interview with Sjur Bergan

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Liberal Education: *Why did the Council of Europe launch an initiative on higher education and democratic culture?*

Sjur Bergan: The Council of Europe is an organization dedicated to promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The council was established in 1949 as the first European organization set up in the aftermath of World War II. Of course, one of its purposes was to prevent the recurrence of horrors like those Europe experienced in 1939–45, but also during the 1930s. At the same time, the council was established as governments in Central and Eastern Europe came under Soviet influence, like Czechoslovakia in 1948. The council started out with some ten members, and it was only after 1989–90, with the end of dictatorships symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall, that the council's membership could expand to encompass virtually all European countries. From twenty-three members in 1989, we now have forty-seven.

At the same time, our understanding of democracy has evolved. In the 1950s, both Europe and the United States looked mainly at the formalities, institutions, and procedures of democracy. In a caricature, if people were able to vote, they lived in a democracy. This is, of course, not intended to underestimate the importance of elections. They are crucial, as are democratic institutions and a democratic judiciary. Yet, if the institutions and processes do not ensure participation and minority rights,

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can we really talk about democracy? Are we in a democracy if women cannot vote, which was the case in some European countries until the post-war years? Can we talk about democracy if laws and practices effectively make it difficult for some groups to exercise their political rights, as was the case with blacks in the U.S. South? Can we talk about democracy if the press cannot or does not operate freely? Can we talk about democracy if people can vote but not engage more broadly in governing the societies in which they live?

Around 1990, many Europeans still had a relatively formalistic perception of democracy. In the course of the 1990s, however, there was increasing awareness that democratic institutions and democratic laws could only work, in practice, in societies where they are embedded within a democratic culture. In other words, institutions and processes can only function if members of society have the attitudes, competencies, and ways of behavior to make them democratic. This is what the Council of Europe means by "citizenship," which goes way beyond the concept of "citizenship" as designating the passport you carry.

Clearly, education at all levels is crucial to developing democratic culture, and that is why the initiative for working on democratic culture came from the Education Directorate. The importance of democratic culture was recognized by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe at the 2005 Warsaw Summit. The initiative on higher education and democratic culture was launched to underscore that higher education is every bit as important as other areas of education in developing democratic culture, and also because



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European higher education institutions are not sufficiently aware of their civic mission. Public discourse on higher education in Europe is very focused on the economic aspects of higher education—which *are*, of course, important. But the role of higher education in society is not just economic.

LE: *The Bologna Process seems to be very narrowly focused on alignment and on credentialing students in specific content or skill areas. Where does a goal of advancing democratic culture—especially in the face of a very diverse contemporary Europe—fit into what European nations are trying to accomplish through the Bologna Process?*

SB: In its first decade, the Bologna Process has been fairly strongly focused on structural reform, in particular on provisions for quality assurance, on reforming the degree systems and establishing qualifications frameworks, and on making it easier to have qualifications recognized across borders—and hence, on facilitating mobility. The reason for this is partly that there were serious issues in these areas, and partly the strong economic focus that I just referred to.

However, this is not incompatible with a concern for democratic culture. One of the council's concerns is to “decompartmentalize” the European higher education policy debate or, in other words, not to talk just about the economic importance of higher education or only about its importance in developing citizenship. Within the structural reforms of the Bologna Process, which were necessary and which have been largely successful, it is perfectly possible and even necessary to develop higher education policies to respond to what the Council of Europe has defined as the four major purposes of higher education, which incidentally we see as equally important: (1) preparation for the labor market; (2) preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies; (3) personal development; and (4) the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

We are now engaged in a debate on “the European Higher Education Area beyond 2010”—that is, on what the priorities of the second phase of the EHEA should be. I believe that the structural reforms of the first phase of the Bologna Process will provide a good basis for a second phase in which we need to look at some of the broader challenges, including the purposes of higher education. That will,

in many ways, be a steeper challenge than the first phase—not least since progress will be more difficult to measure. But it is crucial that we succeed in increasing awareness of the composite mission of higher education. Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms are essential instruments, and they need to be used with vision and purpose.

LE: *In cooperation with the U.S. Steering Committee of the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy—of which the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is a member—the Council of Europe organizes a series of forums on higher education in North America and Europe, including the upcoming forum on “Converging Competencies: Diversity, Higher Education, and Sustainable Democracy” to be held in Strasbourg in October. What are European universities and American colleges and universities learning from one another about important college learning goals through these partnerships and forums?*

SB: Europeans and Americans tend to think we know each other quite well, and while this is often true, we constantly discover new things that we should perhaps have known but that we need to learn and discover. For U.S. higher education, I think it is important to learn about all aspects of the Bologna Process. I also believe the European experience with strong student participation in higher education governance should be of great interest to our U.S. partners, and it is certainly something we try to put forward through our joint forums. In all three forums (2006, 2007, and 2008), student representatives have featured in prominent roles. The strongest experience was perhaps in 2006, when Taciana Khoma from Belarus was a speaker. A few months earlier, she had been kicked out of her university in Minsk because of her involvement with the European Student Union and with the Belarus democracy movement. I am also proud that several European universities virtually competed to offer her a place of study when it became clear she could not continue her studies in her native country.

Not least, I think, U.S. higher education could and should learn from the European emphasis on the need to be able to work in a language other than one's native language. Native English speakers have both an advantage and a challenge. The advantage is that

you can almost always find someone who speaks your language. The challenge is that this does not easily motivate you to learn the languages of others. That is not only a linguistic disadvantage but also a very serious disability when it comes to understanding different ways of thinking. One of the most difficult things about learning your first foreign language is to understand that a concept may be expressed very differently in another language. As the saying goes, whoever speaks only his mother tongue is stuck in his mother's world. The forums held at the Council of Europe are bilingual (English and French).

Still, from my perspective it is perhaps both easier and more interesting to talk about what European higher education can learn from our U.S. colleagues. One important lesson is to appreciate the diversity of U.S. higher education and to understand the roles and function of the huge variety of institutions, from community

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colleges to top-class research universities. Not least, it is important for Europeans to understand the role of community colleges and not brush them off as “unacademic.” Europeans are generally strongly committed to equal opportunities to higher education but often do not appreciate the important role of community colleges in furthering this goal.

The most important area in which European higher education has a lot to learn from our U.S. colleagues is the American concept of liberal education. I already referred to the strong emphasis on economic utility in European higher education debate, and that is certainly not absent from U.S. policy debate either. But U.S. institutions have a much clearer vision of their importance as civic actors as well as of the need to provide their students with a solid cultural, ethical, and philosophical basis of knowledge and understanding that may not be immediately useful but that is essential in



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the longer term. Our societies will increasingly need to make difficult decisions on the basis of incomplete knowledge; we will need to bring together competence from many fields; and we will need to measure short-term gain against long-term risks, measured not only in economic terms but also in terms of values and how our activities and decisions will affect us, as individuals, and our societies. U.S. higher education has given much more serious thought to these issues than the vast majority of European institutions and colleagues. I am particularly impressed with the AAC&U report on *College Learning for the New Global Century* and have tried to spread it in Europe. I had the good fortune to be invited to AAC&U's 2007 annual meeting in New Orleans, and I was very impressed by that gathering of 1,500 higher education leaders committed to the proposition that higher education has a purpose broader than economic well-being.

LE: *What is the "social dimension" of the European Higher Education Area, and how is it being addressed in the Bologna Process?*

SB: Broadly, the social dimension describes the role of higher education in improving not only access to higher education but also opportunities to complete quality higher education. Ultimately, the goal must be that everyone be given the opportunity to realize his or her full higher education potential, that no qualified candidate be forced to abstain from higher education for financial reasons, and that the term "qualified candidate" not be defined too narrowly. What counts is a person's potential more than his or her past achievements. This includes the possibility to participate in academic mobility. That, of course, is a relatively easy goal to stipulate and a much more difficult one to implement.

Admittedly, the social dimension is one of the great challenges we will still face in the European Higher Education Area. One's chances of benefiting from higher education still depend too much on family background, and we are still far from achieving the academic mobility we would like. This is also an area in which higher education policy will need to interact more strongly with other areas of public policy. You cannot discuss equal opportunity without discussing finance, and you cannot discuss finance without discussing what our social goals are. You cannot stimulate academic

mobility without improving visa regulations and work permits, and that is a touchy area for many European governments.

LE: *What are the arguments that the education ministers leading the Bologna Process rely on to describe what modern Europe needs from higher education in this age, and how prominent is the argument for higher education as a "public good"?*

SB: The ministers of the Bologna Process have said twice—in Praha in 2001 and in Berlin in 2003—that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. The fact that they said this twice makes one wonder whether they were stating the obvious or expressing the concern that what has been a key feature of higher education in Europe can no longer be taken for granted. My interpretation is that the ministers expressed a concern, and that raises the question of policies.

It is important to note that the ministers talked not only about public good but also about public responsibility, and that is in my view the more important part of the argument. Clearly, higher education is not a pure public good in economic terms, nor is it a pure private good. It may be of interest to discuss where on the continuum from pure public good to pure private good higher education is located, but the part about public responsibility is the operational part of the statement. This is perhaps more important in a European context, where public authorities have traditionally had a stronger role in higher education policies than their counterparts in the United States have had.

The key question, then, is this: if we want public responsibility to be a key feature of European higher education, what do we need to do? We can no longer be content with broad statements, and we can no longer be content with sloganizing about public vs. private. We need to take a hard look at what the proper role of public authorities should be in furthering higher education in modern societies. The Council of Europe started to do this in 2004–5 through a conference and a book,¹ and this led to a policy recommendation² by our Committee of Ministers, the council's highest political body.

In some areas, public authorities should take exclusive responsibility. This includes legislation, the design of the degree system and the national qualifications framework, and making sure there is provision for quality assurance. In some areas public authorities

The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals. The council is comprised of forty-seven member countries and five observer countries, including the United States. Its aims are

- to protect human rights, pluralist democracy, and the rule of law;
- to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe's cultural identity and diversity;
- to find common solutions to the challenges facing European society, such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance, bioethics and cloning, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, organized crime and corruption, cybercrime, and violence against children;
- to consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative, and constitutional reform.

Additional information about the Council of Europe can be found online at www.coe.int.

should take a leading responsibility, such as in ensuring equal opportunities to higher education. In other areas, such as financing and the actual provision of higher education, public authorities should play an important but not exclusive role. There should be room for private financing of higher education, but public authorities need to lay down the framework within which this financing is provided. They also should not use extensive private financing as an excuse to reduce public funding. The Council of Europe has, I believe, done important work in this area, but I also believe we need to continue the discussion of the role of public authorities as well as of other actors in higher education. This should definitely be one of the key issues in the European Higher Education Area beyond 2010.

To illustrate how important this issue is, let me close with one of my favorite references.

Chile—which is my wife's home country—has launched a series of publications gearing up to the bicentennial of its independence in 2010, incidentally the same year that the Bologna Process will end and lead to the European Higher Education Area. In 2005, the prominent Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi produced a volume in this series called *El sueño chileno*—the Chilean dream. In his book, Tironi says that the answer to the question, what kind of education do we need? is to be found in the answer to another question: what kind of society do we want?

I strongly believe that the key mission of U.S. and European higher education is in helping us develop the kind of society in which we would like to live ourselves and in which we would like our children and grandchildren to live. This requires vision and values, a sense of purpose, and the knowledge, understanding, and skills to put the vision and values into practice. In the age of the sound bite, we need institutions that take the longer view; but the time for action is now.

Higher education must provide society with highly specialized specialists, and it does that very well. Society is in even greater need of intellectuals, however, of people who not only have detailed understanding of a specific academic field but who also have the vision and the intellectual curiosity to understand how their chosen field contributes to the whole, to ask the fundamental question about the purpose and value of our lives, and to answer those questions. Much remains to be done in this regard, but higher education should see it as a pleasure and an honor to provide this type of competence. □

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NOTES

1. Luc Weber and Sjur Bergan, eds., *The Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe Publishing, 2005).
2. Recommendation and Explanatory Memorandum at www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/PublicResponsibility/CM_EN.asp.