CHAPTER 4

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ELITE THROUGH RANKINGS – THE EMERGENCE OF THE ENTERPRISING UNIVERSITY

ENTERPRISING UNIVERSITY AHEAD?

A little more than a decade ago, 1994, the Center for University Development (CHE) began its mission to organise the ‘revolution’ (Umbruch) of the German higher education system. In other European countries such as the UK and the Netherlands this process was already well under way. The German science system, being more hierarchical and less responsive to the public than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts and additionally burdened with the structural conservatism of a federalist regime, was reluctant and late in reacting to the introduction of numerical indicators, evaluations and rankings to universities and research institutes. Until then, the university system operated under the principle of equality mandated by the constitution for all Länder to assure equal living conditions between them, thus also to assure free mobility of students, and the Max Planck Society operated on the assumption that it produced world-class research. Hence, no need to move, so it seemed – despite first initiatives advanced by the German science council suggesting, as early as in 1985, that accomplishments of universities should be judged publicly and in a comparative fashion (Wissenschaftsrat 1985).

The shift only occurred when in 1989 the East German science system had to be downsized and de-politicised before integration into the Western system was possible. For the first time in Germany, formal evaluation processes were applied to institutions of science, albeit to those of the former GDR, but henceforth no credible arguments could be mobilised that would prevent their generalised use in the country as a whole. Thus, 1989 and re-unification marked for Germany, as did the fall of the Soviet empire for the Western industrialised countries, the end of the post-war ‘social contract’ between science and society. One of the latter’s central elements had been the institutionalised trust in the self-regulating mechanisms of science assuring the prudent use of public funds and the ultimate utility for the common good of their expenditure. The erosion of this leading principle gave way to a ‘new deal’ between science and society, basically resting on the idea of
universities becoming both efficient and responsible organisational actors, largely governed by a managerial regime.

Since then a plethora of practices pertaining to ‘new public management’ have been institutionalised in German universities. They make use of a rhetoric that owes its concepts and rationale mostly to the world of business administration, management schools and consultancies and focus on concepts such as accountability, transparency, and efficiency – increasingly used in more and more societal domains. Be it politics, administration, art, education or individual conduct of life, there is virtually no domain left that has not been influenced by the ideas of efficient management. Regardless of whether the object of management is an individual or an institution, the main techniques are continuous (self-)observation and (self-)intervention: As inner or outer conditions change, a new (self-)intervention is called for. Today, management systems abound that offer help for systemic inspection and the search for adaptive responses. From New Public Management in administrative domains via evaluation systems in science to individual self-management aids, managerial procedures currently pervade contemporary societies (Power 1997).

Note that concepts of accounting and its corollaries are not just rhetoric, they are also based upon techniques that ultimately produce the accountable entities they are targeted at. This is true for individual selves who by way of self-management techniques become capable of steering themselves and others in most flexible ways (Foucault 2000; Bröckling et al. 2000), thereby turning themselves into ‘enterprising selves’ (Miller and Rose 1995). This is also true for institutional selves such as universities that by way of accounting and other managerial procedures become capable of steering themselves and others in most flexible ways, thereby turning themselves into what we call enterprising universities.

It is to the emergence of the new identity of universities that this paper would like to make a contribution. In contrast to the use of related concepts such as “Entrepreneurial university” (Clark 1998) or “the enterprise university” (Marginson and Considine 2000), we consider managerial processes to be a prime indicator of the new university and of the rearrangement of science and society at large for two major reasons. First, the ‘entrepreneurial’ is not restricted to selected domains of academic activity, notably to technology transfer, but rather about to become characteristic of all academic processes (e.g., teaching, research, governance, knowledge transfer, public outreach). Granted this perspective, the enterprising university, secondly, becomes a prime mover in rearranging the relation of science and society by way of counting and accounting. The ‘new deal’ rests on enterprising the university so as to render it an efficient and responsible actor, always directed towards the Common Good. While busy subjecting themselves to ratings and rankings, evaluations and excellence initiatives, they seem to lose sight of the contents: what exactly do they consider high quality Bildung, where should research be headed? Are the answers really to be found in the multitude of mission statements presented on the Internet by programs, faculties and universities? Indeed, in our knowledge society, knowledge seems to be defined by (managerial) processes rather than by (knowledge) politics.