ABSTRACT. The discussion of universities and democracy has conventionally dealt first and foremost with the curriculum, or with the spirit of openness and tolerance which characterises the scientific inquiry. In this article I have added a discussion of the situatedness of knowledge and knowledge production, and, consequently, a discussion of the situated character of other roles of the university, including the democratic role. In the light of the regress of political parties and traditional popular movements – phenomena which seem to be true both as regards membership numbers and as regards level of activity – the role as a locally and regionally situated meeting place for a vitalisation and defence of democracy seems a promising one for the contemporary university. The article has also emphasised the links between culture, social capital (“the social fabric”) in the surrounding society, and the economic growth and welfare of the city and region. With concepts such as Bildung (or education), civic competence (or civility), and culture, and I have tried to draw our attention to the actual “places of knowledge,” whose importance will certainly grow in the years to come. The care, the cultivation, and the qualification of these places into supporting infrastructures for cultural life, creativity, industry, and democracy should be seen as a coherent, holistic mission. It needs recognition, and articulation, by all those who are interested in the university as a significant social factor: politicians, industry, the cultural sector, local communities, and, obviously, the academic community itself.

KEY WORDS: Bildung, civic competence, civility, culture and universities, democracy, economic growth, economic significance of universities, places of knowledge, social capital, social fabric, universities

Societies can be destroyed in many ways. One is to make them unjust, which is not to give equal opportunities. Another way is to sustain the false idea that there are institutions that are not dependent on citizens.

My idea is that the concept of Bildung – or “Education”, although the English word does not capture the full meaning of the concept in the Germanic languages – must be taken down from its neo-humanist turn-of-the-century 1800 pedestal and be put right in the heart of our societal concerns. In fact, what Pestalozzi and the Romantics vaguely realised was that Bildung revolved around something we today could call “civic competency.” And part of that is a capacity for initiative, responsibility, a sense that it is necessary that my knowledge is essential and should be put to work – for the sake of everyone.

The worst thing that can happen in a knowledge-based society is when a large portion of its citizens lack this capacity. When you think that there is
always somebody else coming to the workplace to take care of the things that I left behind unfinished. Or when you think that education doesn’t really pay off, and exams, well, that is something for the others, not for me. Or patents, that is something for the others to care about, not for me. Or when you think that you are the only one in the world who can do these important things, the others just aren’t good enough.

CIVIC COMPETENCE

From these very general reflections on civility and knowledge, or Bildung, I draw the conclusion that every single cent, or Euro, that we invest in research and innovation may be wasted if we do not also take care of this larger thing called civil society.

We should opt for an informed and new relationship between the resources we put down on the maintenance of society as a learning organism, on civic competence and Bildung, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the resources we put down on peaceful warfare on the research front, a war that is fought with the 99.7 per cent of the world’s population that happen not to live in Sweden. The same argument would go for almost any country.

Am I advocating reduced funds for research? No. What I have in mind is rather an increase of the social energy that we put down on learning. But perhaps that we show greater concern for the foundation and the house as a whole than we demonstrate for the upper floors, where people like ourselves usually dwell.

The political issue then is this: how is civic competence achieved? There is now a considerable and growing research into these issues. “Social capital” is growing as important as “human capital.” Still, the answer to the question is not straightforward and simple at all. It involves tradition, history, mentality, things that are deeply rooted in society and that politicians can not easily change with reforms or budget allocations. (Which is not to say that they can not do anything.)

Everyone who has children in school or day-care realise that what is performed in those institutions is at least as important as what is going on in our research labs. It is the small children who one of those days will be the grown ups that will take care of you and me when we are old. They will love and work – the two basic things of life, a fact that even Freud realised. They deserve adequate resources and they deserve parents that are involved, when they are in their formative period. Because when they are formed they will make up this thing called society.