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Education, knowledge and social differentiation: new elites and new inequalities?¹

Introduction

Recently the concept of „elite“ has experienced a surprising revival in political and public discourse. For a long time, elite was a term closely associated with politically and socially conservative or authoritarian views. But today, politicians and journalists of left wing, social democrat or “green” persuasion who used to keep their distance from „elitist“ language no longer hesitate to employ the term and to see „elites“ in a favourable light. The recent campaign of the German government to create „elite universities“ may serve as an illustration of this. The project eventually found the support of all relevant political parties, thus indicating that the notion of promoting „elites“ and „elite institutions“ has become widely acceptable.

Of course, politicians and journalists are known to be particularly receptive for fads and fashions. But they are not the only ones who feel increasingly concerned about elites or „new elites“. Professional sociologists do so, too. Indeed, the very title of this paper „Education, knowledge and social differentiation: new elites and new inequalities“, includes the embattled word. The programme committee of the European Sociological Association, undoubtedly a professional body, suggested this title to me when they asked me to give a talk at the ESA congress. I agreed to accept the title. The only thing I contributed to the original wording was to add a question mark at the end.

I begin my presentation with some comments, first on „new inequalities“, then on „new elites“. I shall ask what is so „new“ about them that it justifies the great attention they are receiving. Subsequently, I shall focus on the peculiarities of the higher education system. I shall contend that there is a strong elective affinity between changes occurring in higher education in the wake of globalization and the new topicality of „elite formation“ in advanced western societies.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 7th Congress of the European Sociological Association, „Rethinking Inequalities“, in Torun (Poland), 10 - 13 September 2005.
New inequalities?

Twenty-three years ago, in the year 1982, I presented a paper at the Congress of the German Sociological Association in Bamberg entitled „Old‘ and „new‘ inequalities in world society“ (cf. Kreckel 1983a, 1983b, 1990). I argued there that the conventional view of social inequality research which focussed on vertical structures of class or stratification in national societies was too narrow and I contended that „new“ facets of social inequality ought to be included.

The first reason I gave for this argument was that the conventional view of class or stratification research² tended to underestimate the independent significance of non-vertical disparities, especially of inequalities of gender. From today’s perspective I should add that in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, the gender debate was still something of a novelty in sociology. The problem itself was a very old one, of course. In pinpointing gender inequality as a „new“ inequality I meant that gender was a newcomer on the agenda of sociological inequality research and that it still had to find its place in the theory of social inequality. I argued that gender was to be treated as a structural characteristic of modern social inequality, not as mere a variable of stratification research.

Today, it is safe to say that this aim has been largely achieved. Gender is booming as a topic in sociology, gender studies are taught in many universities. On the level of practical politics, the principle of „gender mainstreaming“ is an accepted part of the policy of the European Union (cf. Burkhardt / Schlegel 2003). It may even be argued that the gender issue has taken away some of the attention space previously given to „classical“ issues of inequality research, such as poverty and class (cf. König / Kreckel 2005). This may or may not be so. But clearly, gender inequality is an established part of inequality research by now. It cannot any more to be considered as a „new“ inequality.

The second „new“ inequality I referred to in my 1982-paper was international inequality. This was not a new phenomenon either, of course. International trade and intercultural communication, colonialism and imperialism etc. have been with us for a long time. My point was that „today social inequality can only be adequately analysed within a global context“. In the paper I referred to the phenomenon of international labour migration, to an emerging „new international division of labour“ and, above all, to the immense gap between rich and poor countries in the world. I argued that the customary limitation of conventional stratification or class analysis to the framework of national societies bracketed out the inequality-generating mechanisms operating on a

² For an extended discussion of the debate about the „conventional view“, see Kreckel (1989; 2004a: 212-223).
global scale. International comparisons could only partly correct this deficit. I wrote that „conceiving of advanced western societies as of relatively autonomous entities amounts to analysing only the tip of the iceberg. Unsurprisingly, those staying on top would prefer to keep it that way. By preserving a self-indulgent and ethnocentric „view from above“, the situation below the waterline remains unclear and is unlikely to be realistically appreciated.“³

As a consequence I suggested a revision and extension of the theory of social inequality which located national structures of inequality in a worldwide field of centre-periphery-relations.

I think that this point is still as valid as it was over twenty years ago, and that the sociology of social inequality is still in need of a convincing theoretical frame enabling us to sort out the intertwinnings of national and supranational structures of inequality (see Kreckel 2004a; ch. 6). In the meantime, Ulrich Beck⁴ has radicalized this viewpoint. He is bitterly critical of what he calls the „methodological nationalism“ of conventional inequality research. Instead, he advocates a switch of perspectives based upon „methodological cosmopolitanism“. Whether one does or does not subscribe to Ulrich Beck’s view, it is clear that a theory of social inequality not taking globalization into account is not any more possible.

In my 1982-paper, the concept of globalization was not yet available, but parts of the issue were anticipated. Of course, the paper was given in the historical context of the „Cold War“ constellation of First, Second and Third Worlds. With the world political turn-over of the early nineties this situation has changed. Now, the relations between Eastern and Western regions in Europe can be discussed in terms of equality and inequality, not any more with reference to their inclusion into opposite „camps“; and the differentiation of the former Third World is fully under way. In this sense the global dimension of social inequality may still be seen as a „new“, although not a very new, aspect of social inequality. And its inclusion into the theory of social inequality has not been fully accomplished yet.

Today, nearly a quarter of a century later, it seems legitimate to ask again whether there are developments in the field of social inequality which deserve to be labelled as „new“ inequalities? Let me select and briefly comment three aspects of social inequality - education, gender and international inequality.

- Sociologists generally agree that formal education is the most important factor

³ The quotes are taken from a later version of the 1982-paper, published in English: Kreckel (1990: 140ff.).

influencing individual life-chances in societies moving from „ascription“ to the „achievement“-principle. There is abundant evidence that alphabetisation, secondary school and university enrolments have experienced a tremendous and continuing expansion worldwide over the last century (cf. Meyer et. al. 1992, Schofer/Meyer 2004). Furthermore, it is quite clear that the Eastern European countries where access to higher education was politically restricted in the 1970s and 80s are quickly catching up now (Stock 2003).

The effects of the expansion of education on social inequality are mixed. On the one hand, sociologists are fully agreed that the class and ethnic backgrounds of children have maintained their strong socially selective influence on participation and success in education, with certain national variations. The much discussed PISA-studies (Baumert et al. 2001) give ample evidence of this. On the other hand, there is disagreement among sociologists as to whether the general expansion of education has been accompanied by improvements of the educational opportunities of children of a lower class background or not. In a comparative study of thirteen countries Blossfeld and Shavit (1993) found „persistent inequality“ and very little change in educational selectivity over time. Others acknowledge that some change has occurred, but of very limited range. As an example I quote from a longitudinal study covering the years 1965 to 1989, carried out in West Germany by Rolf Becker (2004). He found that in 1989 the chances of children of civil service families to reach the highest level of secondary education (the Gymnasium) were 11 times better than those of working class children, whereas the odds ratio had been even less favourable (19 to 1) in 1965. Becker concludes soberly that „the social selectivity of access to the Gymnasium has decreased over time, but it still is quite strong (Becker 2004: 164).

Thus, whichever interpretation one accepts, there is nothing fundamentally „new“ about this debate. The social selectivity of systems of education remains strong, and it still is very much on the agenda of inequality research.

– Virtually the same pattern repeats itself when we look at gender inequality. In the last half century a spectacular and worldwide expansion of women’s participation in primary, secondary and tertiary education has taken place. Today, in all advanced societies, the chances of women and men to reach higher education degrees are nearly equal, although the higher education participation rates of both genders still vary considerably between countries (OECD 2004: 313). But the further up we move on the social ladder, the so-called „glass ceiling effect“ applies makes itself increasingly felt everywhere, national differences notwithstanding. Just take the proportion of women on full university professorships as an indicator: The rate of women professors varies between 10 and 21 percent in the European Union, with an average of 14 percent in 2002 (European Commission 2001: 135ff.; 2005: 18).
Again there is some controversy among sociologists as to whether gender inequality will be reduced over time, „slowly but surely“, as a consequence of the expansion of women’s participation in education (cf. Ramirez / Wotipka 2001, Ramirez 2003) or whether the gendered bottle-neck at the entrance to the top positions continues to operate. But - to echo the quote of Rolf Becker I just gave - the gender selectivity is still quite strong. Therefore there can be little doubt that the sociology of social inequality will still have to deal with gendered structures of inequality for a long time to come. So, again, there is nothing really „new“ about this aspect of social inequality.

This brings me back to the question of international or global inequality. With the growing awareness of the impact of globalization and the lack of a convincing sociological theory of the interconnections between national and global inequalities, it may still be rated a „new“ inequality, as I suggested above. Again, we are faced with an ardent and complex debate. The issue is whether inequality is increasing or decreasing in the process of globalization. But yet again, the disagreement is not as fundamental as it seems. We find an underlying consensus about the well-known fact that the global inequalities of income (and wealth) are extremely high and are bound to stay that way for a long time. However, I shall not elaborate on this here. Instead, I shall turn my attention to my second question, the question of „new elites“.

New Elites?

Readers will have noticed that I have not addressed the elite question as a „new“ inequality so far. In my 1982-paper „elites“ were not mentioned either. Obviously, I did not count them among the „new inequalities“ then. My question therefore is whether we should do so now. A very short account of the fate of elite theory and research in recent decades might help to clarify this (cf for the following: Hartmann 2004, Imbusch 2003, Krais 2001, Wasner 2004).

In the immediate post-war period, the concept of „elite“ played a relatively minor role in sociological theorizing. The idea of the „elitist society“ was still influential. However, the concept of „elite“ was not the same as the concept of „power elite“ or „ruling class“. The latter was seen as a distinct social group that controls the state and economic life. The concept of „elite“ was more general and did not necessarily refer to a small group at the top. Instead, it referred to any group that held power and influence.

5 For a survey of this discussion see Kreckel (2005).

6 An academic version of this controversy was held between Xavier Sala-i-Martin and Branko Milanovic (see Sala-i-Martin, 2002a, 2002b, Milanovic 2002a, 2002b, 2005). A similar discussion, more journalistic in style, took place between Martin Wolf and Robert Wade in the journal „Prospect“ (Wade/Wolf, 2002). See also Firebaugh (2003).

7 I have summarized this debate elsewhere. See Kreckel, Reinhard, „Materielle Verteilungsungleichheiten in der 'globalisierten' Weltgesellschaft“. In: Kreckel (2004a, 316-358).
role in the sociological theory of social inequality. Sociologists were largely in agreement that the distinction of „elites“ and „masses“ which was introduced by writers such as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, Gustave Le Bon or Ortega y Gasset was crude, politically biased and not very helpful for sociological research.

- Thus, if sociologists used the term elite at all, they tended to employ it in a merely technical and descriptive sense. They usually used the plural form of the word and attributed „elite“ status to persons holding top positions in politics, business, the academic world, the media etc. or a high status in the distribution of income and wealth. Descriptive studies of the social composition and the interconnections of „elites“ of this type did not have any great theoretical ambitions. On the other hand, two new elite theories made their appearance, in the post-war period, a functionalist and a critical version.

- The conception of „functional elites“ (Dreitzel, Dahrendorf) or „strategic elites“ (Keller) shared the basic assumption of sociological functionalism that modern societies were characterized by structural differentiation. The various subsystems - politics, economy, education, arts, media etc. - each developed their own distinct status hierarchies, with „elite“- positions at the top. This hierarchical differentiation was seen as a functional necessity, and it was posited that the leadership tasks in each subsystem were most efficiently performed if the elite members were recruited on the basis of merit, not inheritance. In distinction to the older elite theories, the functional view was „democratized“ in that it insisted on the plurality of sectoral elites and that it did not construct an opposition between „elites“ and „masses“ but, rather, a hierarchical continuum of status positions.

- The opposite view is best represented by C. Wright Mills‘ anti-functionalist book „The Power Elite“ (1956). Mills challenged the functionalist assertion that the top social positions are filled by „the best“, and he criticises the thesis of elite-pluralism as a myth. Instead, he claims that the American society of his time was ruled by a socially coherent power elite which mainly represented business and military interests. By controlling the media, they created a „mass society“ whose citizens were disempowered and ideologically mislead.

I will not dwell on these two opposing viewpoints, as they have both succumbed to stringent criticisms long ago. Around Mills‘ book a protracted discussion about the degree of elite pluralism in the USA and other democratic societies developed. Robert Dahl‘s (1962) book „Who Governs?“ set the tune. The outcome of this discussion which was mainly lead by political scientists carries many facets. The one result which

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8 This short summary follows Hartmann (2004, chapters 3 und 4).
may be generalized is that neither the simplified view of a socially and politically coherent power-elite nor the idealized conception of elite pluralism can be upheld. Furthermore, comparative research made it clear that democratic societies are by no means uniform with respect to the double question „Who rules? and „Who governs?“

As far as the theory of „functional elites“ is concerned, it experienced the same fate as the functional theory of stratification in general. The tautological character of the assertion that the top positions in society had to be - and actually were - filled by the most capable persons was quickly spotted. No social scientist aware of the empirical world can be made to believe this. Meritocracy may be an ideal, and it clearly serves as a legimatory device for existing hierarchical structures. But surely, the empirical world as we know it has nowhere been a fully open and meritocratic society. So, it all comes down to a matter of degree. And as comparative research shows again and again, societies are by no means uniform. Neither are their respective „elites“.

So, by the end of the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, a sobering process had set in: The empirical investigation of the „who governs“-question was largely left to the political scientists, whereas sociologists concerned with social inequality developed a mainly technical and pragmatic understanding of elite.

- A good example of this development may be found in the sociological tradition of status attainment research. Here, the main concern is with the empirical identification of the social backgrounds of those holding top positions in society. Education is considered as one of the main factors affecting the status attainment process. „The American Occupational Structure“ by Blau and Duncan (1967) is the classical text of the „status attainment approach“. A substantial revision and elaboration may be found in an equally classical text, „The Constant Flux“ by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992). Their underlying ideal typical model of society is the vision of an „open“, intergenerationally mobile society where everyone is supposed to have the same chance to get to the top (and to sink to the bottom). It should be noted that the elite question is not at the forefront of interest of status attainment research. It aims at measuring the degree of „openness“ or „closure“ of the entire class or stratification structure of a society. In doing so, the social composition of the „upper classes“ or „upper strata“ is also considered. But the primary focus of inequality research are status groups, not „elites“.

- The one sociologist who kept the elite question (if not the term) very much on the agenda of sociology was Pierre Bourdieu and his many followers. From the early beginnings of „Les héritiers“ (1964) and „La reproduction“ (1970, both with Passeron) to his monumental „La distinction“ (1979) and „La noblesse d’état“ (1989), Bourdieu developed his sociology of the French „dominant class“ and their „field of power“. Bourdieu’s towering work combined elements of the critical tradition of elite analysis in the sense of C. Wright Mills with certain features of the
status attainment research approach. With his habitus theory and the distinction of various forms of economic, cultural and social capital he provided the conceptual tools for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of status transmission in an ostensibly open and meritocratic society. But clearly there is nothing „new“ about the French dominant class he analyses. The entire point of Bourdieu’s sociology is his emphasis on the continuity of the dominant class. The early influence of the structuralist thinking of Claude Lévi-Strauss is unmistakable: Plus ça change plus c’est la même chose ...

So, if we want to find „new“ elites we are obliged to look elsewhere. The obvious answer seems to be at hand: „global elites“. It is interesting to note that in the worldwide debate over globalization, the notion of the formation of a „global elite“ is finding support on both sides of the line of combat, among anti-globalizers as well as among neo-liberals. And even some critical intellectuals who advocate the formation of a global civil society are also not averse to the vision of a „cosmopolitan“ elite (cf. Beck 2002). The difficulty is that it is hard to tell at present to what extent the notion of an emerging global elite is based on sound prognosis, on alarmism or on wishful thinking.

The growing emphasis on internationalization in higher education and the emergence of International Business Schools everywhere might indicate that national systems of recruitment are losing their impact. It is certainly the case that supra- and international career structures are gaining importance (cf. Marceau 1989, Sklair 2001). One only has to look at the highly international staff composition of the World Bank, the UNESCO or the Brussels administration, or of the various NGOs. And it is also no secret that multinational corporations increasingly recruit internationally. But to speak of „global elites“ in a meaningful sense would imply that the access to leading positions in the various organizations acting as „global players“ is independent from national selection and career systems. In this respect the evidence is largely negative. A survey of available research by Michael Hartmann comes to the sober conclusion that at the top of international and global organisations „national career paths dominate very clearly“ (Hartmann 2004: 150; cf. also Wasner 2004: 217ff., Schwengel 2004, Müller 2002). To be sure there is a lot of „networking“ going on between global leaders and celebrities, be it in Davos or elsewhere (cf. Bottomore / Brym 1989; Sklair 2001). But the recruitment patterns and cultural backgrounds of these leading figures are still predominantly national ones. I conclude from this that the question of whether a „global“ (or „cosmopolitan“) elite is or is not in the process of formation still is an open question, not a foregone conclusion. Further research is required and further developments are to be awaited (cf. Müller 2002).
„Mass“ higher education and „elite“ universities?

So far, my search for empirically significant „new elites“ was even less conclusive than that for „new inequalities“. But the fact remains that the elite-discussion has experienced an undeniable renaissance in recent years. Why is this so? Should one conclude that it simply is a case of „Much Ado About Nothing“ or of a „phantom pain“ (Mayer 2004)? I do not think so. My guess is, rather, that the new concern with elites and elite formation is a symptom of something else. What could this be?

A first indication may be found if we remember the fact I alluded to before that politically and ideologically opposing camps, the Right and the Left, the pro- and the anti-globalization movements seem to be in agreement that the elite issue is an important one, important enough to be fought about. I want to take this seriously and to use it as a starting point for developing a few working hypotheses deserving further investigation.

I begin by turning the attention to the higher education system. There, talk about „elite“ institutions, „top ranking“ academics, „centres of excellence“, competition for the best research students or simply for a „world class“ position is rampant. This sudden inflation of euphemisms and elitist language is all the more surprising as higher education has always been „elitist“ in a certain way. After all, the assumption that higher education is not simply education, but higher education, is deeply ingrained in the self-perception of traditional universities and their members. University members used to take this state of affairs simply for granted, they cultivated academic understatement and ostentative modesty. So, why this sudden lack of self-confidence and the compulsion to use the language of marketing and advertising?

– One obvious reason is the process of indirect commercialization that affects modern universities, especially the etatist higher education systems predominant in Europe. In using the word „indirect commercialization“ instead of „academic capitalism“ (Slaughter / Leslie 1997) I want to emphasize that the direct commodification of academic work has not succeeded so far. In Western Europe, state financing still dominates, and so does state control over university finances. But in the context of economic globalization, all sorts of new economic and fiscal pressures are exercised upon modern national states, and they are passed on to the higher education systems depending on them (cf. Kreckel 2004b). The universities find themselves increasingly confronted with various forms of external „output“ control (evaluation, accreditation, audits etc.) obliging them to prove what was previously taken for granted - that they are „top“ quality. So, unsurprisingly,
they now raise their voices and claim elite status.

– The so-called „Bologna Process“ which tries to commit all European higher education systems to common standards (B.A. - M.A.-structure, credit point system etc.) seems to point into the same direction. The aim of creating a „European Higher Education Space“ (cf. www.bologna-bergen2005.no) implies that European universities should openly compete for students, staff, funds and reputation. Competing successfully means being „the best“, being „elite“.

However, the aim of being „the best“, being „elite“, being „on top“ implies by definition that only very few universities can be on top. The rest will end up in the middle (i.e. in mediocrity) or at the bottom of the competitive system (i.e. in obscurity). One may be surprised that the European universities seem to accept this game of competition where the great majority of them cannot win. That is to say, the elite discourse in European higher education is more than a simple game of impression management. Like all real competition, it must produce more losers than winners. Why is this accepted, or at least not forcefully opposed, by the majority of the members of academia in Europe?

From „industrial society“ to „knowledge society“

I now wish to develop a few developmental hypotheses based on the ideal-typical (and admittedly crude) distinction between industrial society and knowledge society. I begin with a few remarks on industrial society:

1. One of the inevitable concomitants of fully developed industrial societies is universal compulsory schooling („mass education“). If one sees industrial society as a society based on „fordist“ principles of industrial production and „weberian“ principles of rational administration, mass literacy seems to be a functional prerequisite.

2. In all European nation states, compulsory schooling was coupled with a stratified and more or less selective system of secondary education. It was topped by a university system catering for a rather small „educational elite“.

3. This three-tiered background structure was coupled with a meritocratic understanding. Life-chances should be allocated on the basis of educational achievement, not inheritance and ascription. At the same time this served as legitimatory device for the real inequalities of life-chances. Lack of success meant lack of merit.

4. The meritocratic principle was operationalized by more or less strict systems of credentialism which were supposed to guarantee that there was a reasonable
I am not concerned here with the question of whether this meritocratic self-description explains or merely idealises the facts of industrial society. But one outcome is clear, it justified the selectivity and exclusivity of higher education beyond any doubt. Higher education really was „higher“ education; universities were „elite“ by definition.

And then, suddenly, we began to be faced with a conceptual impossibility, with the word „mass higher education“, „Massenuniversität“. It started to get used in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, soon accompanied by the even uglier expression of „massification“ of higher education. Today it is quite common. But it goes back to the last stage of fordist industrialism. This were the times when writers such as Jürgen Habermas (1968) and Daniel Bell (1974, 1976) began to herald the coming of a new „knowledge society“\(^{10}\). Knowledge societies are characterized by knowledge-intensive jobs demanding lengthy qualifications and yielding relatively high levels of income. The former jobs of industrial mass production tend to emigrate to low wage locations, such as China today. Let me put forward a few tentative theses concerning this emergent type of society:

1. Whereas industrial society is a society of compulsory education and universal literacy, knowledge society is in the process of becoming a society of „compulsory higher education“. If we look at the latest figures published by the OECD (2005: 249) we see that an average of 53 percent of the relevant age cohort started a higher education course in the member states of the OECD in 2003. The leading countries were Iceland (83%), New Zealand (81%), Sweden (80%), Finland (73%) and Poland (70%); the USA scored 63%, Japan a mere 42%, Germany 36%. (cf. also Schofer / Meyer 2004).

2. If the assumption is correct that Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden etc. are showing the direction into which higher education in advanced societies is moving and if we are really faced with something approximating „compulsory higher education“, the existing higher education system which is adapted to delivering credentials to only a small minority of the population is under severe pressure. How can it maintain the high level of prestige it is used to?

3. By the same token the entire system of credentialism and the underlying principle of meritocracy are in danger of losing their ability to legitimate inequality and to provide it with some degree of justice. If half of the population or more hold university degrees, degrees loose their distinctive powers with respect to the

\(^{10}\) I cannot even try to cover the complex issues related to the concept of knowledge society in the course of this short paper. For a very thoughtful discussion see Weingart (2001). Cf. also Stehr (1994), Delanty 2001.
access of higher positions.

4. Seen in this light the efforts connected with the Bologna process to introduce standardized higher education credentials throughout Europe may be a losing battle. If credentials are going to be devalued on national levels due to the increasing „massification“ of higher education this is bound to happen at the European level, too.

5. Thus, one day we must expect that not having a university degree will have the same effect as not having completed primary education has already today. Not having been to university will work as a barrier of access to any respectable job, not just to elite positions. It will have lost its predictive powers to allocate people to higher jobs and leadership positions.

6. If and when this happens, there seems to be no new legitimatory device in sight which could replace academic credentialism. The alternative seems to be „naked“ competition on the national or international scale. If the meritocratic rhetoric is still going to be maintained the only indicator for merit will be - success. Success would thus become self-legitimatory (cf. Solga 2005).

Now, the depth of the problem becomes somewhat clearer. As „mass higher education“ and general competition seem to be the only available answers to the impending challenges of knowledge society, the „Humboldtian“ historical compromise is in jeopardy. This compromise allowed university professors to get on with their research as long they did a little teaching on the side to justify their appointment (cf. Schimank 1995).

One can understand that modern academics who are overburdened with teaching duties are on the look-out for the save havens of research „mode 1“, not for „mode 2 knowledge production“ in overcrowded universities (Gibbons et al. 1994, Nowotny et al. 2001). That is how they begin to dream of „elite universities“. If it comes to that, a few will be the successful ones. The rest will not.

An alternative would be to withstand the competitive pressures and to remember the traditional strengths of European universities. As far as the research of their members was concerned, they were as competitive and quality-oriented as academics always were. But they refused to accept an open competition between institutions. Academic quality ranking remained insider knowledge. With respect to the quality of teaching, on the other hand, the European university tradition aimed at generally high standards, with no privileged places of learning.11 Thus, the emphasis was on solid qualifications

11 The most conspicuous exceptions of this rule were, obviously, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The French „grands écoles“ are elite institutions of a different kind, as they do not focus on
for all university graduates, not only for those who were able to find access to the top establishments. The expectation was that this fundament of solid academic education would be able to generate sufficient numbers of very good graduates who could then move on to more exalted academic careers.

It would seem to me that this European path is still worth trying. It may even be that it is better suited to the requirements of knowledge society than a purely competitive system which leaves too many people behind. But with the enormous expansion of the student population which we are facing it will be a daunting task to tackle. I still think it should be tried.

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