

University: From History to Philosophy

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Abstract

By referring to the history of university in Western civilization and the thoughts of French philosopher Jacques Derrida concerning the definition of University, this paper briefly examines the problem concerning university as an institution and as an idea. To do this, I argue that the history of the university intimately follows the history of Western culture. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire it was the Christian church that held Western culture in unity. The University of Paris was the medieval university par excellence. In 1694, a new type of university came into existence that separated from the ways of the past. Established in Prussia approximately five centuries after the University of Paris, the University of Halle departed from the Parisian idea that higher education must be comprehended inside the framework of the Christian faith and introduced the idea of the university as a secular institution existing to assist the secular state. This idea is the essential element of the modern university. Both the universities of Paris and Halle emphasize that aspect of the university that has represented the interests of the wider society. In contrast, the University of Berlin was founded in order that a few academically capable individuals could pursue knowledge. The current age of globalization, formed around the idea of economism, necessitates a new type of university. Its exemplar is the University of Phoenix, founded in 1976 as a business-related university compelled by law to make the most financial gain for its financiers. The idea forming the foundation of this university is that the most significant purpose of higher education is to teach functional skills and knowledge to its 'customers'—the word it prefers to 'students'. Derrida challenges the common connotation of university as an exclusively institutional term. He argues that university as an idea has a boundless, unrestricted and unconditional implication. In conclusion, this paper summarizes the major themes articulated in those discussions, and suggests further directions to explore towards expanding the constructive conceptualizing of university, based on the 'inclusion of the Other'.

Keywords: Paris, Halle, Berlin, Phoenix, 'search for truth', living with ideas, solitude and freedom, Derrida, 'the university without condition'. 'inclusion of the Other'

Publication: (2009, Spring) *Historical Perspective & Historiography*. Alzahra University Press. 19(1 [76]):123-156.