THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY: SOME ONTOLOGICAL AND EMPIRICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract. Knowing the university's ontology is necessary to develop the social function of the university. To renew the university two elements are needed: the identity of the university and its determined action to tell the truth to the powerful. This literature-based paper analyses the university's socio-scientific ontology to deal with its identity, thus proposing action derived from an individual and collective ethic that elaborates on the concept of the parrhesiastes. Our proposal helps to discern what should be the core of the social function of a renewed university institution for the 21st century.

Keywords: university, university's socio-scientific ontology, university's identity, parrhesia, parrhesiastes, academics' ethics

1. Introduction: the context that delimitates the debate on the meaning of the university today

The context of this essay is the university at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. During its millennial history, the university institution has had a variable relationship with the society (and its dominant powers) of each moment. However, it was in the Europe of the Middle Ages when universities were configured based on certain characteristics that, totally or partially, can be observed in the

currently existing universities (Palfreyman and Temple 2017). As Rüegg (1992: xxix) points out,

> as a community of teachers and taught, accorded certain rights, such as administrative autonomy and the determination and realization of curricula (courses of study) and the objectives of research as well as the award of publicly recognized degrees, it is a creation of medieval Europe, which was the Europe of papal Christianity.

In any case, the university has adopted a subordinate position to the current social powers (Kavannagh 2009, 2012) in search of its legitimacy in each historical setting.

There are different assessments of the current situation of the university. Such evaluations range from the positive (with the verification of their flourishing – increase in the number of universities, students, etc., worldwide, Frank and Meier 2007) to the negative (due to the loss of their essences, the neoliberal emergence on campuses or the impoverishment of their ethos; Giroux 2020, Readings 1996, Vicars 2019, Zuidhof 2015). If we are able to dispense with value judgments, we will see that both perspectives seem to be supported by what we observe in the contemporary university: the success of the institution, proof of validated legitimacy, runs parallel to the departure from what it was in the past (from medieval mists to the brilliance of enlightened reason). Does it make sense to try to fix its immanent traits when we must accept that if it persists, it is because it has been able to transform itself in a profound way?

Our proposal is oriented towards the idea of university from the confluence between recent developments in social ontology, empirical analysis of the contemporary university and organization studies, which implies, of course, incorporating the historical (recent) and sociological approaches to the university institution. The justification for this multidisciplinary approach is found both in the fact that the most fruitful analyses of the contemporary university have come from these intellectual territories and in the inability of each one of them separately to offer a complete and useful vision of such a complex and polymorphic institution. Our starting point in this exploration is the recent historical evolution of the university.

Since the end of the 1970s, neoliberal ideology has driven substantial economic, political and cultural transformations throughout the world. In this historical context, the Great Recession of 2008 has exacerbated the transformative pressures on most of the institutions of Western capitalist society. One such institution is the university. This transformation has taken place on different levels, more or less visible to the public. In the debate that appears in the media, self-serving simplifications are observed that, by shaping the dominant opinion, facilitate the implementation of modifications (for example, in the university's governance or its financing) derived from the neoliberal program. The characteristics of the university affect this transformation process. Thus, its complexity, antiquity and diversity – by making it impossible to show even approximately through the communicative formats in vogue – facilitate the trivialization of the debate that opens about it from an ideologically born perspective

of neoliberalism. For Peters and Jandrić (2018: 554),

> the shift from the Public University circa 1960–80 to the Neoliberal University has been comprehensive and has transformed the university irrevocably and perhaps irreversibly into a consumer-driven system where freedom is defined in terms of consumer sovereignty. The liberal public university is no more – if it ever was. As Bill Readings intimates in his influential book *The University in Ruins* (1996), there is no going back except in nostalgic terms.

To understand and act with respect to this transformative hurricane that the university is suffering, it is necessary to adopt a perspective that combines the reformulation of its ontological essence with the analysis of its emerging aspects, as pointed out by Al-Amoudi and O'Mahoney (2016: 23-24),

> [W]hile it can be argued that ontology is *vacuous* in the absence of substantive enquiry, it is equally the case that substantive enquiry is *blind* in the absence of ontological reflection. Moreover, while ontology is conventionally presented as logically and chronologically anterior to substantive enquiry, the relationship between both practices is iterative rather than linear. ... There is, instead, **an ongoing iteration between ontological reflexion based on the finding of previous substantive enquiries and refined substantive enquiries informed by renewed ontological reflection**[emphasis added].

Our goal in this essay is to gather a non-exhaustive series of elements typical of ontological reflection and empirical research on the contemporary university to facilitate the understanding of its ongoing modifications. That is, the interaction between ideas coming from ontology with others derived from empirical research is our selected way to study some of the crucial aspects of today's university. We will complete that framework by adding elements from organization studies (such as the idea of organizational identity), history and sociology.

The joint presentation of these elements will lead us to a proposal for ethical action (both from the collective and individual point of view within the university) that renews the social responsibility of the university institution.

2. Materials and methods: recent developments of ontology in the social field and its relations with university ontology

University and ontology each have a millenary history. However, it is necessary to advance in the effort to better establish the ontology of society and, specifically, that of the university. As Little (2016: xvi) states, 'ontology matters in the social sciences.' Although metaphysics has a millenary tradition with respect to ontological

problems, it is surprising that – with regard to the social sphere – the 'ancient philosophers' did not approach them in a systematic way, and it was not until the 17th century that this began to happen with Hobbes, Pufendorf, Filmer and Locke (Epstein 2018: 3). However, from that time until now, we have gained a huge and enlightening body of work carried out by a significant number of authors, both from the philosophical field (to name only some of the contemporaries, Searle, Epstein, Guala and Little) and from the very social sciences (Barnett being an outstanding example in what specifically refers to the social ontology of the university).

Perhaps the most relevant result of such efforts has been the convergence between the views of social ontology from philosophy and from different social sciences (such as economics and higher-education studies). Among the possible avenues of advancement in the social ontology of the university is the consideration of university studies within the framework, not of social ontology in the broad sense but in that of ontology as a specific social object (that is, what could be called the socio-scientific ontology of the university). Among such studies on the university, those carried out by Barnett in which he proposes three planes of analysis to register the specific characteristics of the contemporary university may be very useful for this purpose.

According to Lawson (2019), socio-scientific ontology refers to the particular results or social objects (he explicitly cites money, markets, cities, companies, technology, gender and universities) that are formed according to the most general principles analysed by socio-philosophical ontology. Among such generic principles, he points out that the aspects and phenomena of the social sphere have a procedural and relational nature. In his opinion, social reality is procedural because it exists only by being reproduced or transformed 'through the sum total of our individual practices'. A similar distinction is used by Al-Amoudi and O'Mahoney (2016: 16) when speaking of committed versus uncommitted ontology (or philosophical versus scientific ontology).

It can be said that Barnett (2016) is part of this socio-scientific current of ontology by walking the path that leads from previous substantive research (relative to both the context and the present situation of universities in the world) to a new level of ontological reflection referring to these institutions. Thus, he proposes to understand universities as diverse realities that occupy different places in a space that he defines from three planes of analysis (Barnett 2016: 43 ff.).

The first is delimited by two opposite extremes: the university as an institution and the university as an idea. In the background, we find each specific university located between two poles: the university as it is in a specific time and space and the university in its possibilities. In Barnett's third plane, each university is placed according to two limits: the university in its particularities and the university in the universals with which it is linked.

When imagining the universities along the three planes, one becomes aware of their enormous complexity since contradictory behaviours can appear at different points in the planes. In Barnett's words (2016: 71),

universities are extraordinary places. Soft and hard are their surfaces,

open and closed are their spaces, quiet and noisy are their sounds, quick and slow are their rhythms, and local and global is their scope. Their movements, accordingly, are far from regular. Within themselves and in their interactions with the wider world, they jostle often uneasily. This is inevitable, for the university is far from being its own creature but is subject to forces beyond its control. Often, it may seem that a university mirrors a pin-ball machine, with the ball being bounced this way and that. Its path is not of its making.

These ideas of Barnett undoubtedly represent an important analytical advance for the understanding of the contemporary university and its possible future developments, especially because they allow us to understand that no university (as, in general, no organization) behaves in a monolithic way, as a coherent entity would.

In this regard, relevant – among other issues – are those issues related to methodological individualism as well as the connections between nature and society. Specifically, Little (2016) extensively values what he calls 'an actor-centred approach to the social sciences', which implies that – in the last resort – social entities, influences between subjects and social processes are 'rooted in individual actors'. But, he adds next, that does not mean subscribing to methodological individualism. Here he makes an important contribution by stating that

individuals are always enmeshed in ongoing social relationships and practices that are, for them, external and objective. So, we cannot separate sharply between 'social' and 'individual'; the social depends on individuals, and individuals depend on their formation and situation within a social setting (Little 2016: xvii).

His rationalization leads him to conclude that the social world is different from the natural one and that it cannot be considered as a system but rather as 'a patchwork, a mixture, an ensemble, a Rube Goldberg machine, a collage, or a jumble. Its properties arise from the activities, thoughts, motivations, emotions, and interactions of socially situated persons' (Little 2016: 3-4).

Considering that the social and natural worlds have different structures, Little takes a position distanced from that of other authors, such as Searle (2010), for whom the ontological root of society must be sought in nature. Searle is confronted with what he considers (2010: 3) the fundamental question in contemporary philosophy:

How, if at all, can we reconcile a certain conception of the world as described by physics, chemistry, and the other basic sciences with what we know, or think we know, about ourselves as human beings? How it is possible in a universe consisting entirely of physical particles in fields of force that there can be such things as consciousness, intentionality, free will, language, society, ethics, aesthetics, and political obligations?

He estimates that there are two 'conditions of adequacy' for all possible answers

to such questions (id. 3-4):

> First, we must not allow ourselves to postulate two worlds or three worlds
> or anything of the sort. Our task is to give an account of how we live in
> exactly one world, and how all of these different phenomena, from quarks
> and gravitational attraction to cocktail parties and governments, are part
> of that one world. (...) A second condition of adequacy is that the account
> must respect the basic facts of the structure of the universe. These basic
> facts are given by physics and chemistry, by evolutionary biology and the
> other natural sciences. We need to show how all the other parts of reality
> are dependent on, and in various ways derive from, the basic facts. For our
> purposes the two most fundamental sets of basic facts are the atomic theory
> of matter and the evolutionary theory of biology. Our mental life depends
> on the basic facts.

Therefore, different social ontologies can occur depending on their positioning with respect to the monism/dualism continuum. Considering the objective of this essay, it seems more fruitful to continue advancing in the cross elaboration of social ontology and applied social studies, paying attention to essential problems such as the behaviour of social agents.

In this sense, Little considers that the prediction of agents' behaviours (not even their understanding) is not possible. The analytical schemes developed by the various social sciences (as, for example, rational choice in economics) are incapable of explaining large social processes by themselves. Even though such processes have, more or less, long durations, for Little, they are dynamic configurations that are in no way a reflection of more elementary underlying causes (2016: 3): '[S]ocial causes are heterogeneous, probabilistic, agent driven, exception laden, and interconnected – with the result that we cannot hope to have a full model of the workings of a social system. We should not reify social entities and structures'.

In conclusion, the contingency that dominates the social world should lead us to the humility of recognizing the limits of our capacities to represent it, to make abstractions about it and, finally, to anticipate predictions about the behaviours that it comprises. Similarly, it should lead us to recognize that 'our knowledge of any particular snapshot of social reality is inherently partial and incomplete' (Little 2016: 4).

Such limitations when predicting are related to the irreducibility presented by the incompleteness of the social sciences (Little 2016). Little takes this idea from Bhaskar (1982, 1998), interpreting it in the sense of considering that society as a whole exceeds any series of theories elaborated to explain certain social processes.

Without hesitating to admit that understanding the social world is a titanic task, we try to advance slightly towards that end by pondering the arguments collected so far to analyse the concept of the identity of the university as an organization. It is precisely this concept that allows us to speak of the university as an organizational subject, as discussed below.

3. Organizational identity and characterization
of the university as an organizational subject

In order to speak of the university as an organizational subject, it is necessary to answer two questions: can the organizational identity of the university be defined? And to what extent is there convergence between the behaviour of its members and that of the university (if convergence exists)?

3.1. The concept of organizational identity of universities in the literature

According to Dumay, Draelants, and Dahan (2020: 2), the concept of organizational identity has been used to understand the transformations that the university is currently experiencing in four areas:
a) Influence of the transformation of higher education and its regulation on university organizations;
b) Forms of affiliation, identification and commitment of different interest groups with the university to which they are linked;
c) Strategic management of the image and public relations of the university with respect to its environment;
d) Organizational change in universities.

Based on the seminal works of Hatch and Schultz (2002) and Glynn (2008), Dumay, Draelants and Dahan's review of the literature leads them to conclude that, albeit with certain limitations, the university as an organization has a certain capacity to become a social 'actor' and, consequently, to assume a differential identity. Consequently, its governing bodies have to consider it more as a 'stakeholder organization' than as the conventional 'republic of academics' (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007: 478) as a traditional metaphorical image of what the university should be.

According to the pioneering article by Albert and Whetten (Albert and Whetten 1985), personal or individual identity can be related to organizational identity (without being fully comparable; Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton, 2000, Whetten 2006). Under this analytical prism, organizational identity (Whetten 2006: 220) is defined as 'the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations'.

This definition rests on two basic premises (Whetten 2006: 221): first, that organizations are in modern societies something more than mere social collectives since they are considered – from the perspective of acting capacities and social responsibilities – as collective social actors (Bauman 1990, Coleman 1974, Scott 2003, Zuckerman 1999), which requires distinguishing between organizational identity as a collective actor and collective identity as the identity of a collection of actors (Whetten 2006: 221).

The second premise is that identity corresponds to the actor's subjective sense of uniqueness (vision of themselves or definition of themselves). Although Albert and Whetten (1985) do not consider organizations to be like people, as organizations are human creations, it could be thought that they are 'complex extensions of *us*' (Gioia and Hamilton 2016: 29).

3.2. The university as an organizational subject

Organizational identity compels its members to act in a certain way through emotional attachment (Ashforth et al. 2020). To reinforce this link, an ethical breath is added to the organizational identity (ethical organizational identity; Verbos and Simms 2017) linked to the use of metaphors.

In organization studies, metaphors and metonymies have been widely used, as shown by Morgan (1986), who later doubts them as useful tools to understand the reality of complex and multidimensional organizations (Morgan 2016). In the case of the university organizational identity, some authors have recognized its existence using metaphors (university as 'organized anarchy'; Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972) and others have denied, which allows them to consider the university as any other organization. This denial of its differential character is necessary if university leaders are to be persuaded to adopt cultures, behaviours and decision-making models typical of the company (Reed 2001, 2003). Such induction has a clear ideological root known as 'new managerialism' (Deem and Brehony 2005) as a result of the evolution of the so-called 'new public management' (NPM; Bleiklie et al. 2016, Broucker et al. 2016, Lorenz 2012, Münch 2014), which, in turn, draws from the sources of neoliberalism (Birch and Springer 2019, Brown and Carasso 2013, Ergül and Coşar 2017, Marginson and Rhoades 2002, Tudiver 1999). In the dissemination of the NPM approach, the predominance of a discourse in which 'a combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices' is given is of crucial importance.

At the university level, the so-called 'academic capitalism' develops (Cantwell and Kauppinen 2014, Münch 2014, Olssen and Peters 2005, Slaughter and Leslie 1997, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), linked to the enterprise university (Marginson and Considine 2000).

The result of this neoliberal movement is the implicit assignment to universities around the world of action premises that are considered indisputable (Mittelman 2019, Zuidhof 2015). Among them, it is worth mentioning the use of models and techniques typical of business management, the quantification of all activities carried out at the university (and especially those related to teaching and research) as a requirement for their control through evaluations related to some objective values imposed by governments and other external agents, the demand for a closer relationship with the companies present in the immediate environment of the university and, finally, the categorization of universities around the world in various rankings determined with methodologies that present serious shortcomings when it comes to justifying the rankings' conceptual validity. These methodological deficiencies (in some very serious cases) can only be understood in the ideological context from which the 'hidden agendas' of some of the creators of the rankings originate (Brown 2006, Hazelkorn et al. 2014, Kehm 2014, Longden 2011, McLaughlin et al. 2018, OECD-JCR EC 2008, Teichler 2011).

Faced with this situation, a current number of authors (Bazul 2018, Mittelman 2019, Vicars 2019) propose that academics place their activity socially based on clear ethical premises, a proposal that we share when analysing the link between the university and parrhesia in this essay.

3.3. Towards a socially useful university

Once these two premises have been enunciated (the organization as a collective social actor and a subjective sense of uniqueness) for the development of a socio-scientific ontology of the current university, we are in a position to tackle the question of what a socially useful university should be like in real life. We consider that it should be made up of university students who are aware of being that (and who, therefore, behave as parrhesiastes, παρρησίαστες) and that its organizational identity should evolve harmoniously. We deal with both issues below.

3.4. A harmonious evolution of the identity of the university

It is precisely its proven ability to adapt to historical changes that allows the university to be recognized as an extraordinarily versatile institution (Palfreyman and Tapper 2014). However, in a few moments in the past, that university versatility has been put to the test as it is now since the university has to revalidate its legitimacy by demonstrating that it serves to solve important social problems.

If the university is accepted as a social subject, how should it behave? From the prevailing point of view on the neoliberal university, it must act competitively in the global market for higher education while accepting uncritically the functioning of that market. Therefore, it is one more organization within societies configured by organizations of various kinds. The ubiquity of organizations suggests a society of organizations instead of a market society (Simon 1991) in which organizations 'create order in people's way of thinking and behaving' (Brunsson 2017: 1). This state of affairs, however, is bitterly criticized by authors such as Rushkoff (2010: 7):

> [I]t is corporatism itself: a logic we have internalized into our very being, a lens through which we view the world around us, and an ethos with which we justify our behaviors. Making matters worse, we accept its dominance over us as preexisting – as a given circumstance of the human condition. ... We have succumbed to an ideology that has the same intellectual underpinnings and assumptions about human nature as – dare we say it – mid-twentieth-century fascism.

It is then seen as natural for public entities to behave in a similar way as how companies do in the markets (Brunsson 2017). One example is developing the concept of university organizational identity through the deployment of the university's reputation, which means activating a series of transformative processes (with respect to the university's norms, values and cultural traits; Stensaker 2019: 252-253) without the need to obtain a prior and explicit acceptance of them by university students.

Faced with this vision, the critical positions towards the established social order defend, to a greater or lesser degree, that the university must act as a moral and intellectual beacon of society (Giroux 2020). In that case, to what extent can an organization (institution) such as the university be considered an ethical subject? An

ethical orientation of the university could be considered parrhesia, but what would it imply for its members and the organization as a whole? (It could be the case that some individuals and groups act as such without the other university members' acquiescence.) What social effects would this parrhesiastic activity have?

3.5. A university capable of unfolding its full potential requires university students who are aware of being that: towards the socio-scientific ontology of the university as a set of parrhesiastic actors

If it were accepted that the individual is the core element in the constitution of the university, we could ask ourselves what characteristics the said individual would need so that the university could adequately serve society through the conservation, creation and dissemination of knowledge. This fundamental function of the university would contribute to achieving increasingly just and balanced societies. One of the dangers that would have to be avoided would be that the university would stagnate (thus ceasing to provide that fundamental service), as happens with other institutions. The consistency of university students in critical behaviour could prevent such danger from materializing. It is clear, then, that the parrhesiastes model would make it difficult to fall into both acceptance and adulation of the dominant powers. Such a model of conduct would facilitate the consistent development of the identity of the university organization. Through this consistency in identity, the university would become a potentially transformative organizational subject of society.

Let us move on in this argument, starting with the idea of parrhesia.

In the most recent decades, a revitalization of the concept of parrhesia has been observed as an inspiration for ethical behaviour in various fields, especially from a configuration of the contemporary world as a dense electronic communication network (Capurro 2006). Parrhesia has a long history in Western culture, masterfully analysed by Michel Foucault, especially in the six lectures he gave at the University of California, Berkeley, between October and November 1983 (Foucault 1999, Peters 2003) after a long elaboration upon the relationships between truth and power (one of the recurring themes of his work; Cooper, Ezzamel, and Willmott 2018: 680).

Parrhesia, which represents an ethical position that leads to taking a risk to tell the truth, had a long and complex evolution in ancient Greece (Foucault 1999, 2004, 2016, Gros 2015). For a long period, parrhesia meant the following (Gabilondo and Fuentes 2004: 23):

> [T]he nexus of union between caring for oneself and caring for others, between the government of oneself and the government of others, the frontier where ethics and politics come together [our translation].

Parrhesia consists of saying publicly what the subject, the parrhesiastes, believes should be said and doing it in the way that the subject deems most appropriate. It is a practice in which ethics, politics and language converge and that aims to move others towards virtue (understood as a way of life subject to truth). The ethical position of the parrhesiastes is based on the care of the individual (επιμέλεια έαυτοῦ), which –

on many occasions – means questioning the status quo, turning one who takes risks for telling the truth into someone subversive.

Parrhesia (which etymologically means 'to say everything'; Foucault, 2004: 36) implies opening up completely and sincerely to others without avoiding anything that is on one's mind and leaving aside any rhetorical pretence that could hide any part of one's thoughts (even though the fullness of that mental openness could be qualified; Simpson 2012). By assuming that commitment towards itself and society, the parrhesiastes is aware of telling the truth in a certain social context and, specifically, 'to the difference of status between the speaker and his audience, to the fact that the *parrhesiastes* says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk, and so on' (Foucault, 1999: 3).

Publicly expressing the truth requires courage, and it will be that expression that tells us that we are facing a true parrhesiastes because to be one, a person must take a risk (even that of dying). Faced with the ethical dilemma of telling the truth and suffering reprisals for it or of keeping quiet and being false with oneself, the parrhesiastes will always choose the first. Between pleasing the powerful person or group through flattery and attracting that person or group's anger by saying what everyone is silent about, the parrhesiastes decides to be disobedient (Bang 2014).

Depending on the relationship between the parrhesiastes and their interlocutor, several types of parrhesia can be distinguished (Gros 2015: XXX): the citizen (the freedom to speak in public space that was only recognized by Athenian citizens by birth), the democratic (speaking before the assembly in the agora to tell everyone what they do not want to hear), the autocratic (telling the truth to the sovereign, who will show themself as a tyrant if they disregard or punish the counsellor who acts as the parrhesiastes), the Socratic (Socrates highlighting with his words the ignorance or bad faith of his interlocutor; Allard 2013), and the Hellenistic (the teacher crudely exposing the truth to the disciple).

In summary, and speaking in general terms, it can be said that for most of the Greek texts in which this concept appears (from the fifth century BC to the fifth century AD), parrhesia is understood in the following sense (Foucault 1999: 5):

> [P]*arrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.

When we advocate the practice of parrhesia in the university, we refer both to parrhesia's public dimension (citizen and democratic parrhesia) and to the private one that affects the social realm (autocratic, Socratic, Hellenistic). Parrhesia deserves special mention in the public sphere when it is directed towards the community of academics to which the person who exercises it belongs. When academics

act as parrhesiastes, they care for their identity within the academic community. Nevertheless, their parrhesiastic activity also entails some risks, because parrhesia is usually not well accepted by the academic community (Steele 2010). The consequences for parrhesiastic academics must be taken into account if the exercise of parrhesia is promoted in the university. It is also convenient to explore other aspects of academic parrhesia, such as the gender dimension of the parrhesiastes (Gaus 2019) or if the students' evaluation by their professor involves a moral judgement of them besides an assessment of their knowledge and competences (Freund 2009).

Parrhesia – as an inspiring principle of a pedagogy oriented towards the development of a democratic and responsible citizenship – promotes ethical behaviour that 'can help to fortify the intellectual courage teachers need to resist or denounce aspects of an educational order that presents itself as eminently reasonable but is irrational at its core' (Burch 2009: 75).

However, in many contemporary organizations of relatively large size (including, in general, the university), this intellectual courage would have to be present in a large number of their members for the parrhesia to unfold all its positive effects. Some authors have proposed achieving this critical mass of parrhesiastes institutionally by facilitating their performance through mechanisms such as the promulgation of ethical codes, the protection of whistleblowers and the defence of open and sincere dialogue (Vandekerchove and Langenberg 2012). These institutional processes conducive to promoting the performance of a sufficiently large number of parrhesiastes in the organization are driven by contemporary technological systems that allow us to speak of a 'digital parrhesia' (Allard-Huver and Gilewitz 2015). Thus, the contemporary digital space is configured as an agora where, neither more nor less, democracy is at stake (Nayar 2010).

The performance of the university based on its traditional values (those that inspire the unconditional search for knowledge and its intellectual openness) can be, in the opinion of Bleiklie (1999), precisely what determines the university's destiny in a world that judges it based on its performance (in the dominant framework of NPM) by being the promoter of a civil society that can become its main supporter. However, this is not a path that leads univocally towards a horizon of progress in the modernist sense since we must consider the effect that stupidity has in relation to the study carried out at the university (Heaney 2017).

If a certain type of action of the members of the contemporary university based on parrhesia is defended, and this institution is guided in its conduct by that same commitment to telling the truth to the society that supports it, political action is being proposed that is oriented to modify the panorama in which universities operate. Here again appear the two levels in which parrhesia operates: the individual and the organizational. Looking specifically at the individual, it is observed that the consistency in the behaviour of academics (that is, the greater or lesser dissociation of their behaviour with respect to what they proclaim) determines their political presence in the institution. In this sense, the joint analysis of Foucault's parrhesia and the figure of the conscious pariah drawn by Arendt (1978) is illuminated by Tamboukou (2012). This author explores the tensions that surround the courage

that speaking the truth implies in the philosophical and political spheres, coming to value them in relation to the situation that British academics have experienced in recent decades and which she does not hesitate to describe as 'dark times' due both to their growing abandonment of the practice of speaking and acting together and to his failure to serve as an example for his students in their search for freedom (Tamboukou 2012: 862).

The model of individual self-government based on parrhesia that Foucault proposes generates in the parrhesiastes a 'disposition towards firmness' that allows it to be ethically guided in an uncertain framework (Luxon 2008). Therefore, after analysing the situation, the parrhesiastes could act politically being aware that there are different possible relationships between ethics and subjectivity. Such a finding invites us to think that the search for balance between words, behaviours and relationships with others involves recognizing the conflicts of values existing in a society and, therefore, admitting different ways of being and thinking. In short, 'politics, too, would seem to need multiple manners of being, modes of truth-telling, and models of subjectivity' (Luxon 2008: 398).

Finally, when the subject adopts a political position, they will suffer tensions that may cause them to question the ethical approach that led them to this position. It is even possible that this questioning erodes the strength of this ethical approach. Faced with this situation, the practices of self-government of the individual must have as a point of reference – according to Foucauldian discourse – an ethical firmness that will only be such if the person assumes that it can never be achieved fully and completely. That is, the parrhesiastes actors trust their own values and defend them in the social group, but that does not imply that they are exempt from doubts regarding the validity of such values (Luxon 2008: 399). What is relevant, then, would not be that the individual acts rigidly with respect to an immovable set of values, or that they do so in relation to an incontrovertible external truth, but rather that they establish a true relationship with others. This concept of parrhesia would also admit, in an alternative vision of parrhesia that emphasized its self-reflective and aesthetic aspects (Simpson 2012: 100),

> the constructive telling of fictions to both oneself and others that would produce the effects of truth. In this way, *parrhesia* would function proleptically within an aesthetics of existence to modify existing relations of power and to imaginatively construct novel selves and social configurations.

In sum, parrhesiastes, albeit its doubts, can nonetheless play a crucial role in the university conducting itself in a useful way for the society that nurtures it in the sense of telling it the truth at all times to achieve higher levels of equity and wellness.

4. Discussion: open questions and expectations

We first verify a series of observations on the generic features of the ontological and empirical elements of the analysis of the university that we have approached:

i) There is a wide heterogeneity in the approaches, methodologies, epistemologies, research objectives and languages.

ii) In general, the authors considered using the perspectives and methods of their disciplines of origin (philosophy, sociology, education, etc.); therefore, it is risky to propose points of convergence between them or even relatively minimally shared conceptual repertoires.

iii) Philosophers who write about this area tend to suggest progress through discussion with other authors (with writings of the type 'Reply to . . .'). The essence of their debates revolves around the purity of the argument derived from a more or less undisputed source of authority (generally, an outstanding philosopher in their field of affinity). Authors inserted in other philosophical traditions then show their disagreement by invoking the dominant intellectual authority of their current tradition.

iv) Finally, a minimum consensus is not observed, not even in the object to be studied.

Against this background, we intend to contribute some ideas that facilitate the adoption of a new perspective of the university by opening the disciplinary focus and seeking the integration of various areas of knowledge.

When the intersections of the ontological and empirical dimensions of the analysis of the university are observed from the perspective of organization studies, several additional questions stand out, beginning with the partial treatment that is given to the organizational complexity of the university. Here, two visions predominate: that of a monolithic object endowed with a unique will that leads it towards clear behaviour and that of the regulations of how the university should be. The adaptation of these ideas to the analysis of the contemporary university requires contrasting them with that of organizational identity, because this kind of identity allows – within organization studies – an integral character to the organizational agency (understood as the 'exercise or manifestation of the ability to act'; Schlosser 2019).

Our intention was not to definitively resolve such arduous and complex questions but rather to present in an orderly fashion the relationships between the various conceptual developments that are useful for any contemporary reflection on the university. In this sense, the social ontology (and, more specifically, the socio-scientific ontology) opens a fruitful panorama in which to insert the ontology of the university. We also consider the idea of organizational identity relevant since it allows us to consider the university as an organizational subject. Additionally, we consider the ethical dimension both of those who make the university and of the university itself as a subject. Such an ethic could be based on parrhesia since daring to tell the truth to the powerful (be it the sovereign or society), even at the

risk of suffering serious consequences, is a behaviour that combines some of the essential characteristics of what the university has represented throughout history (a critical approach to reality; free speech; independence; social service; the creation, transmission and implementation of knowledge; and serving as an example).

Starting from these bases, a proposal for individual and collective action based on the concept of the parrhesiastes (παρρησίαστες ['one who speaks the truth to power']; Foucault 1983) could be presented. However, such a proposal, situated on the normative plane of duty, would have to be completed (to develop its full transformative potential) with a careful analysis of the main economic, social, cultural and political factors that condition the behaviour of individuals and organizations today. Thus, combining the normative and positive planes in which the conduct of the university unfolds would make it possible to endow the university with a realistic and fully useful role in society both now and in the near future, revitalizing it in the face of a worrying drift that has been observed during recent decades in the most advanced countries where universities – in general – are losing their character as basic centres of thought in favour of other institutions (such as think tanks, private research centres, etc.). It is these institutions that generate the models and discourses that are essential for economic, social and political action favourable to certain interests today. Only a handful of prestigious universities are accepted into this thought-creating game, while the rest are relegated to the roles of mere transmitters of this emerging thought (often uncritically) and trainers of the workforce required by new business developments. The vibrant diversity that the world presents, the immense challenges it faces, and the ever-widespread desire for equity require a university founded upon ethical, responsible and transformative behaviour.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report no conflict of interest

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