

The University between State and Market: what Kind of University, for what Type of Knowledge, and for Whom?

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Introduction

The title of this monographic issue stems from the idea that, in recent decades, public university systems in various regions of the world have progressively oriented themselves towards market logics, revising, transforming, and at times even betraying shared and taken-for-granted conceptions of the public university (Walker 2025). This collection of articles thus presents itself as a space for reflection aimed at observing the ongoing reconfigurations of university governance, in terms of centre–periphery relations, inclusion–selection, equality–ranking and, of course, public–private dynamics. Although these transformations have unfolded differently depending on national contexts and their respective starting points, they have produced a progressive convergence around similar conceptions of quality, mission, and impact within university systems (Calhoun 2006; Council of Europe 2007; Walker 2025).

A possible entry point into the topic, therefore, lies in identifying a shared notion of the public university, a concept that is far from univocal. In a first, juridical-institutional sense, it is understood as an entity of the State, defined by public ownership, funding, and regulatory framework; nevertheless, Article 33 specifies its institutional framework by safeguarding the freedom of teaching and the organizational autonomy of universities, while Article 34 emphasizes the right to education and open access to the highest levels of instruction for all (Constitution of the Italian Republic 1948; see also Council of Europe 2007). A second, economic-functional interpretation instead conceives the public university as a producer of public goods – knowledge, education, and research – characterized by collective benefits that cannot be reduced to market logics. Hence the emphasis on the public origin of funding as a distinguishing criterion, as well as the definition of higher education as a “public good” and a “public responsibility” in UNESCO documents and in European debates on the public role of the university (UNESCO 2015, 2019; Council of Europe 2007; Walker 2025). Alongside these perspectives, a sociological approach considers the public university as an institution that contributes to the reproduction and transformation of society through the formation of elites, social mobility, and the production of knowledge in relation to the State and civil society (Bourdieu, Passeron 1964; Bourdieu 1996; Marginson 2016). Finally, a normative–value-based definition emphasizes that a university is public not only by virtue of its legal status or sources of funding, but because it is oriented towards the common good, the promotion of equity, access, and social responsibility. In this direction also lies

the position of UNESCO, which defines higher education as a “public good and a public responsibility,” regardless of the legal nature of its providers (UNESCO 2009; Locatelli 2018; Marginson 2011).

1. *University between State and Market*

Starting from these different conceptions of the university, the contributions collected here broaden the analytical focus to the university as such, investigating how the public/private distinction today cuts across contexts, practices, and forms of academic subjectivation. The essays gathered in this volume represent, at different levels of generality and depth, a systematic analysis of the university and of what it means to conduct research and teaching within public and private institutions devoted to the production and circulation of knowledge. The opening article, by Polat S. Alpman, is devoted to a re-examination and interpretation of the thought of Michael Burawoy, a sociologist of international standing who passed away following a tragic accident in February 2025. In line with the irresolvable opposition between society and the self-regulating market brought to light by Karl Polanyi (1974), Alpman recalls that the university, much like other spheres of life and work, has been progressively subsumed within market logics, resulting in a substantial transformation of its institutional mission oriented towards the free production of knowledge.

Not that, in the past, universities – both public and private – were exempt from having to confront issues such as financial sustainability, budget accountability, and the search for funding. In this sense, the image of the “ivory tower,” a kind of Hegelian “life of the spirit” that is said to have characterized the work of academic staff, as a sign of a wholly snobbish detachment from real life, may have been possible at the individual level, but it has never been the condition of the public or private governance of the university, which has had to confront, in the past as in the present, problems of financial sustainability. Rather, what has been observed since the last decades of the twentieth century is the progressive homogenization, through neoliberal economic globalization, of research and teaching according to entrepreneurial logics. Paraphrasing a saying dating back to the social movements of the 1970s, “it’s capitalism, baby.” Or rather, with Fernand Braudel, capitalism operates as a megamachine that, in its progressive trajectory of expansion, not only expunges forms of life incompatible with it, but is also capable of “crushing men [and women], bending them to the will and to the superior demands of the dominant societies” (Braudel 1978, 10). After all, if the capacity of capitalism consists in bringing social relations and institutions back within its own economic rationality, going so far as to incorporate even the most intimate spheres of individual life, how can we think that, under such conditions, universities are exempt from the progressive commodification of knowledge?

But let us examine in detail what, at the turn between the twentieth century and the present, have been the main developments that have shaped an entrepreneurial vision of the university. The closing decades between the 1970s and 1980s mark a shift in the political paradigm. The presidency of Ronald Reagan in the United States and the long period of Conservative government in the United Kingdom under the leadership of Margaret

Thatcher represent an ideal watershed in relation to the preceding period. Alongside the overcoming of the Fordist model of production centered on the large factory, in favor of a fragmentation of production according to a networked and globally integrated productive organization, a broad process of deinstitutionalization of social citizenship was set in motion, no longer characterized, as in the past, by the safeguarding of a series of protections (Raniolo 2012).

The respective political leaders, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, advocated a minimal conception of the State, privatized public services, and initiated a progressive dismantling of the welfare system (with regard to these latter two aspects, this applies particularly to the United Kingdom and much less to the United States, where at the federal level the country has never developed extensive forms of social protection) (Gallino 2012). The rhetorical arguments of the period framed state intervention in the economy as a disguised form of state socialism, reducing public services to a managerial form of governance centered on competition. This process was particularly evident in the United Kingdom, where it was applied both to public healthcare and to universities (Giubileo 2012). The latter, from that moment onward, were required to seek on the market the funding they needed (Guazzaloca 2015; Ravasio 2023). But let us proceed in order, retracing the key developments that oriented universities in the United Kingdom towards an entrepreneurial direction. By virtue of their history and constitution, autonomous from the influence of political power, universities accessed public funding, according to the logic of block grants, for those who applied. From 1984 onwards, the principle of value for money was introduced, according to which a correspondence must exist between the education provided and its cost; thus, students become customers who purchase on the market an immaterial good such as higher education. The top-level figures within each university are reconfigured in managerial terms: those occupying leadership positions, whether academic or administrative, are strongly encouraged to undertake financial management training; at the same time, internal decision-making processes within each university are to be centralized in top-level positions, in order to ensure greater alignment with the rapid changes of the economic and entrepreneurial world and to establish close collaboration with it (Jarratt 1985). Shortly thereafter, the system of public funding for universities also changes.

In 1986, a standardized mode of research evaluation based on the peer review system, the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), was introduced. From then on, public funding has been allocated on the basis of the results achieved according to the RAE. Alongside the change in the funding system, universities, as noted previously, were required to seek funding on their own outside public support. The most effective way to induce them in this direction consisted in drastically reducing state funding. Until the 1970s, public funding for universities in the United Kingdom could cover, in some institutions, up to 90% of current expenditures. Subsequently, from 1981 to 1984, the Thatcher government reduced public funding by annual amounts ranging from 14% to 17%, and by 2% in the subsequent years of Conservative government. During that period, the overall revenues of universities in the United Kingdom increased significantly, rising from £0.7 billion in 1976 to £2.2 billion in 1986. However, it was the internal composition of these revenues

that changed significantly: whereas in 1976 public funding covered, overall, 76% of expenditures, by 1986 it had declined to 57% (Shallock 1989). Changes of considerable scope, inspired by the same market logic, also occurred in the forms of contractualization of university staff. While in 1981 full-time academic staff—whose costs were covered by universities—amounted to 34,297 individuals, six years later, in 1986, this figure decreased by 8.4%; over the same period, staff employed on the basis of external funding lines increased, rising from 9,795 in 1981 to 14,330 in 1986, representing a growth of 46.3%. Following the same trend, part-time staff also increased significantly, from 1,678 in 1981 to 3,247 individuals in 1986, an increase of 93.5% (Walford 1988). The university, in line with broader changes that occurred in the world of production with the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, also increased the proportion of precarious academic staff. Furthermore, the new institutional architecture overseeing the central governance of the university is endowed with new evaluation agencies. The University Grants Committee, a central body composed of academics and tasked with allocating public funding, which in the past operated primarily as a clearing house between government and universities, subsequently loses its nature as an independent agency, assuming the task of implementing, from a technical and procedural standpoint, the political choices of the government (Walford 1988; Chiang 2004; Jong 2012). With a legislative reform in 1992, the new agency becomes the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC), altering its internal composition: it now includes, alongside academics, representatives from the business sector; as regards funding, the system shifts from the original block grants to contract agreements, which provide for controls, such as audits, and the alignment between expected and achieved results (Chiang 2004). In 1993, an agency named the Higher Education Quality Council is established, tasked with monitoring the quality of teaching, later becoming the Quality Assurance Agency. Here too, through the use of audits and external academic staff, the quality of teaching is evaluated according to parameters and indicators determined by the designated agency (Jong 2012). Finally, the Education Reform Act of 1988 establishes that the governing bodies of universities must include “independent” members, that is, individuals not drawn from the academic world, in a number not less than half of the entire governing board, the body overseeing the executive management of universities. The reconfiguration of university governance is aimed at opening universities to the demands of external stakeholders. As expressions of the socio-economic world, external stakeholders are expected to orient universities towards the market (Shattock 2008). The presence of individuals from the worlds of business, commerce, and more generally civil society within decision-making bodies is intended, according to the new political reformers, to constitute a guarantee that higher education institutions respond effectively to the functional requirements of development and knowledge for the country.

From the 1980s onwards, in OECD countries, the English model began to serve as a reference for European university systems and beyond. The university is progressively shaped by the changes associated with New Public Management and redefined no longer as an institution oriented towards the public good, but as an organization to be governed through criteria of efficiency, performance, and accountability, within a rationality that

takes the market as its implicit horizon of reference (Byun 2008). As Clarke and Newman (1997) observe, this does not represent a retreat of the State, but rather its reconfiguration: the State becomes a “manager-regulator” and governs at a distance through indicators, audits, and benchmarking, imposing homogeneous standards regardless of the specificities of institutions.

In this context, notions that are apparently neutral and universally shareable, such as transparency and accountability, find a concrete translation in units of measurement and technologies of governance that orient academic action towards what is measurable and comparable. As Jankowski and Provezis (2014) show, accountability takes the form of a “technology of self-governance”: universities, departments, and individuals internalize external evaluation criteria, reorienting their practices in relation to rankings, attractiveness, and economic returns. The result is a substantial shift: transparency is no longer accountability towards the citizenry, but competitive visibility within regulated quasi-markets.

This process has not been opposed, but has often been consolidated also by reformist approaches of a progressive orientation. As Gewirtz (2002) and Brennan and Naidoo (2008) highlight, the transition from welfare to “post-welfarism” does not overcome the neoliberal paradigm, but rather stabilizes it, combining rhetorics of equity with instruments of competition, choice, and performance measurement. In this way, the State continues to be central, but as an architect of regulated markets rather than as a guarantor of rights. In the academic field, the scope of this transformation is captured with particular clarity by Wendy Brown (2015), who interprets neoliberalism as a “stealth revolution” capable of severing the link between the public university and democracy: the university is reshaped as a “firm-like” actor, in which value and legitimacy are defined by metrics of productivity, impact, and competitiveness, rather than by criteria of truth, justice, or critical function. In parallel, the paradigm of “academic capitalism” (Slaughter, Rhoades 2004) shows how the State itself reorganizes public funding in order to incentivize market-oriented behaviours, incorporating public resources into circuits of private valorization. This synthetic reconstruction of the main changes that have taken place in the university system of the United Kingdom, and of its progressive diffusion, spreading like an oil stain across many countries, both Western and beyond, clearly highlights the role played by the State in orienting university governance in an entrepreneurial direction; an aspect that lies at the core of Alpman’s essay, both with regard to its theoretical formulations and, in greater detail, to the analysis of case studies concerning countries located on different continents, geographically distant, and yet all reproducing the neoliberal model of the university. Similar considerations are present in the essay by Paolo Do, which specifically examines the relationship between public and private universities in certain countries of Southeast Asia. More precisely, the essay highlights how the conventional distinction between public and private universities tends, in that region of the world, to be inadequate for interpreting the processes of change affecting universities. Indeed, branches of Australian universities operating in Singapore function according to distinctly entrepreneurial logics, despite formally belonging to parent institutions classified as public universities. In this sense, it is not the formal distinction between public and private

universities that, in itself, makes the difference, but rather the concrete form of management, oriented either towards the public mission of the university or, alternatively, towards entrepreneurial logics that place greater or lesser economic returns at the forefront of internal decision-making.

In this regard, certain European examples, such as the Netherlands and England, help to clarify how, in practice, the distinction between public and private universities can be misleading. In the Netherlands, as a result of political choices dating back several decades, higher education is composed almost entirely of public universities, whereas in England universities have historically been configured largely as private associations. The Netherlands, however, was the first country in continental Europe to introduce, from the early 1990s onwards, governance reforms analogous to those of English universities (Capano 2011; Enders *et al.* 2013; Regini 2015). These internal reforms have been so far-reaching that, when a university faces the need to reduce academic staff costs, it may operate according to the principle of “restructuring,” which, for example, entails that a lecturer recently promoted to associate professor may be downgraded to their previous position as a researcher, with a corresponding reduction in salary. Similarly, English universities, whose academic staff are employed under a private law contractual regime, may easily dismiss staff when the university, as is currently occurring in some cases due to Brexit and the consequent decline in enrolments from European Union countries, decides to eliminate certain degree programmes.

Furthermore, from both essays – those by Alpmann and by Do – an apparent paradox emerges: at the very moment when universities are increasingly assigned a strategic role in socio-economic development processes at the national level – this applies in particular to advanced countries and to those in the process of development that orient production towards immaterial goods or goods with high added value – the more they are induced, through neoliberal state regulation, to rely on the market and on private funding, as if this were the optimal path to achieve the strategic objectives attributed to university institutions. In reality, private funders are primarily attracted to applied research, that is, to a type of research that must yield commercial results in a short time, while they show little interest in promoting basic research programmes that necessarily require many years before producing any tangible outcome (Mazzucato 2020).

The essays that follow – by Agnese Desideri and Sandro Landucci on the Italian university system, and by Federica Floridi, Federica Micale, and Silvia Cataldi on the evaluation criteria of degree programmes in Italy – constitute a critical assessment of the national university system. The former reconstructs the key stages that led, on the one hand, to the overcoming of the centralist model of the university of Napoleonic origin and, on the other, to the first tentative signs, during the 1980s, of the introduction of principles and procedures inspired by university autonomy. Subsequently, however, particularly with the most recent university reform of 2010, the so-called Gelmini law, university governance has been oriented towards market criteria. The reader, in comparison with what has been outlined regarding the changes in the university system in Great Britain, will be able to note the significant analogies between what occurred across the Channel between the 1980s and 1990s and what later took place with the 2010 reform in Italy.

All this, in any case, taking into account a fairly clear caveat from our point of view: whether it be New Public Management, as recalled by the authors of the essay on the evaluation of degree programmes, or audit culture, these new instruments of evaluation, with the introduction of new watchwords such as excellence, competitiveness, accountability, strategic plan, stakeholder, and research outputs, are nothing other than elaborate systems of concealment aimed at orienting the university in an entrepreneurial direction, presenting as neutral procedural evaluations a precise – and not even particularly hidden – political project of the commodification of knowledge.

The review of the essays collected in the monographic issue concludes respectively with the contributions of Christelle Manifet and of Andrea Lombardinilo and Paolo Brescia. The former examines the French university system, focusing on the criteria governing students' access to higher education. Although situated within a dual national system, characterized by a structure divided between “elite” universities and those of lower rank, the author highlights how the policy of open access, a traditional value reference point since the reforms of the 1960s, is today subject to revision and adjustment in response to the need, also in France, to introduce selective criteria that privilege excellence and the international reputation of universities. The latter, Lombardinilo and Brescia, direct their attention to the analysis of the European research funding programme “Creative Europe,” emphasizing its potential to constitute a shared space of research and the contribution that this programme can make, with Jürgen Habermas, to the construction within the European Union of a public sphere centered on the principles of democracy and solidarity.

2. A Tailored University?

The selection of articles suggests that higher education systems are engaged in processes of revision according to the logics outlined above. In “Education at a Glance 2024” by the OECD, total expenditure on education (all levels) is reported to average 5.1% of GDP in 2020; in tertiary education, institutions are “mainly publicly funded, although there are substantial and growing levels of private funding” (OECD 2025). A synthetic OECD indicator on “spending on tertiary education” notes that the private share (student fees, enterprises, foundations) is “increasingly significant” and represents a way of supporting costs alongside public funding (OECD data, “Spending on tertiary education”)¹.

¹ Available at www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/spending-on-tertiary-education.html, accessed 1 April 2026.

Figure 1. *Source of university funding. Source: OECD*

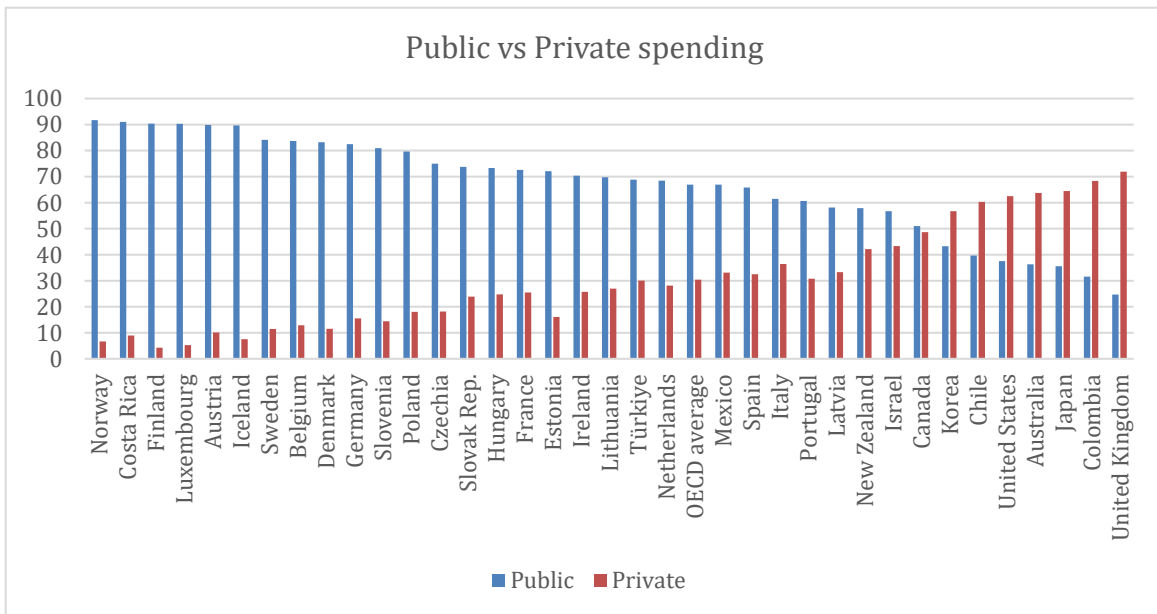
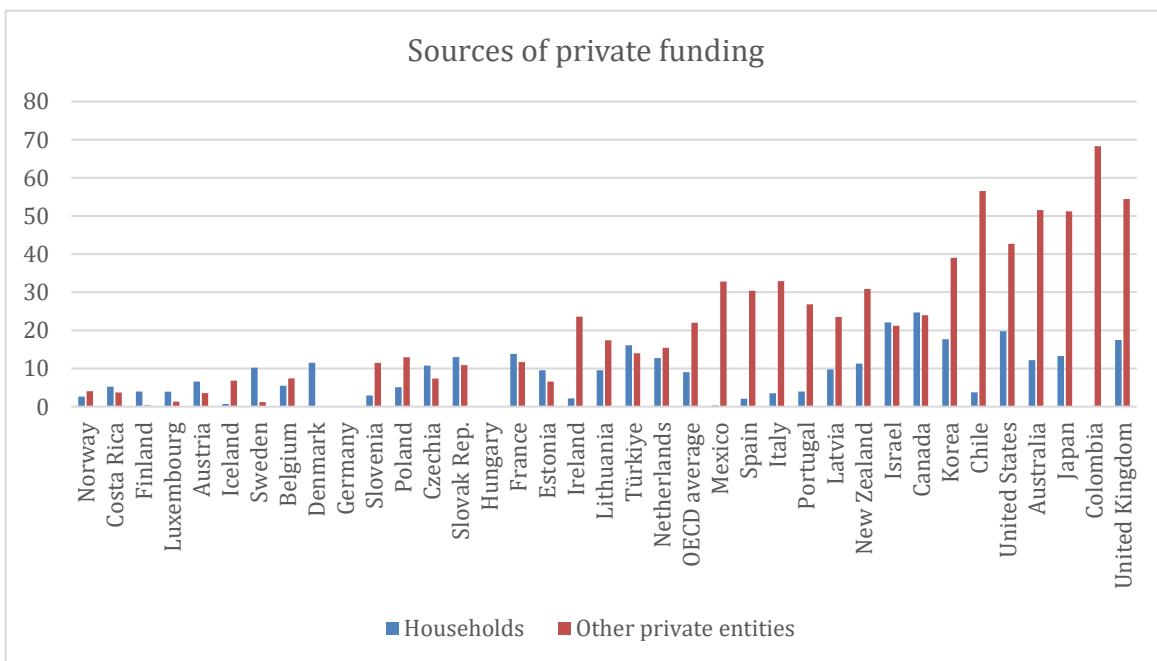


Figure 2. *Sources of private funding, distinguished between households and other private funding sources. Source: OECD*



The two figures, derived from OECD data on spending on tertiary education, illustrate the distribution of education funding between the public and private sectors across different OECD member countries. The data show that countries such as Norway and Finland rely almost exclusively on public resources, exceeding 90%. By contrast, countries such as the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom display a predominance of contributions from households and other private entities. The statistics make it possible to compare government expenditure with individual or other private investment across different national systems. In Italy, the National University Council reports that the performance-based share of the Ordinary Funding Fund – that is, the portion of funding not distributed on the basis of historical criteria, but allocated to universities according to performance indicators relating to research, teaching, and the ability to attract resources – reached €2.5 billion in 2025 (€100 million more than in 2024), accounting for 30% of the total FFO net of student-related measures and other earmarked items (Consiglio Universitario Nazionale 2025).

The document is consistent with the principles of New Public Management and places at its core the “standard cost per enrolled student,” intended to reach up to 70% of the FFO, thereby confirming the idea of funding universities on the basis of measurable and comparable outputs, according to criteria of efficiency and productivity typical of corporate management. Similarly, the scale of the performance-based component (30% of the FFO), linked primarily to research evaluation, configures a system of incentives and internal competition among universities, in which resources are allocated on the basis of measured performance rather than according to needs or public missions.

These instruments – standard cost, performance-based funding, and safeguard clauses that modulate the “growth” of universities – are precisely the tools through which New Public Management constructs a “quasi-market” (Le Grand, Bartlett 1993) within the public sector: universities are formally autonomous, yet strongly steered by indicators, targets, and mechanisms of financial and reputational accountability. In this sense, the CUN opinion clearly shows how, in the Italian case, state regulation does not retreat but rather transforms into a form of remote, “at a distance” regulation (Osborne, Gaebler 1992), governing universities through numbers, rankings, and controlled competition rather than through direct political planning, in accordance with the logic of New Public Management.

This framework both fuels and complicates the pressure exerted by international rankings, which constitute one of the most visible devices through which global competition among universities is constructed and governed. Far from being mere classificatory tools, they configure a veritable regime of permanent measurement that translates complex dimensions such as research quality, academic reputation, internationalization, and even graduate employment outcomes into numbers, indicators, and comparable scores. In this sense, rankings function as cognitive infrastructures of New Public Management: they render the university “calculable,” comparable, and thus governable according to market logics, introducing a shared language of performance that cuts across highly diverse national systems.

The power of these devices, in terms of differentiation and discrimination, lies not only in the numbers themselves, but in the fact that they define a global standard against which universities are called upon to position themselves, reinforcing the idea of isomorphism (Becucci *et al.* 2025). Rankings do not merely describe the university world: they perform it. Once governments, national evaluation agencies, the media, and students adopt them as reference points, ranking metrics become policy constraints and objectives; at the symbolic level, the student becomes a customer who expects the university to provide the appropriate resources to successfully enter the labour market. Many countries have introduced performance-based funding mechanisms directly inspired by these indicators, rewarding scientific productivity measured through publications and citations, the attraction of international students, the capacity to establish partnerships with firms, and the improvement of graduate employment outcomes. At the same time, universities develop branding and internationalization strategies designed in relation to their positioning in rankings: joint degrees and selective alliances, the recruitment of “star academics,” aggressive publication policies in specific outlets, and targeted reputation campaigns.

From this perspective, rankings operate fully within the paradigm of New Public Management. Rather than governing university systems through direct political planning, standardized indicators are defined, data are collected on a large scale, rankings are constructed that produce visibility and comparison, and actors – universities, departments, individual academics – are left to adjust their behaviour in order to climb hierarchical positions. It is a form of regulation “at a distance”: authority does not intervene by prescribing what is to be done, but establishes the framework of measurement within which all actors are incentivized to compete.

3. *Between Public University and Public Sociology*

The following table provides an interpretative matrix of the transformations currently taking place in university governance, focusing, for each dimension, on the dominant configuration, the critical effects, and the possible rearticulations inspired by an idea of a civic-collegial university.

Table 1. *Transformations of university governance: dominant devices, critical effects, and possible rearticulations*

Dimension	Dominant Configuration	Main Critical Effect	Possible Rearticulations
Governance	Strengthening of boards, management, and external actors; formal autonomy combined with control at a distance	Weakening of internal representation and marginalization of less powerful publics	Greater plurality in governing bodies; non-symbolic involvement of students, local communities, and vulnerable groups
Decision-making	Verticalization of strategic choices and reduction of collegial deliberation	Reduction of substantive transparency and concentration of power	More open deliberative procedures; accountability towards academic communities and relevant publics

Dimension	Dominant Configuration	Main Critical Effect	Possible Rearticulations
Evaluation	Centrality of standardized indicators, benchmarks, audits, and rankings	Reduction of quality to measurable performance; incentive to competitive isomorphism	Plural metrics including equity, territorial impact, participation, and long-term research quality
Educational and research strategies	Selectivity of provision, emphasis on economic sustainability and more attractive sectors	Risk of course closures and marginalization of less profitable but socially relevant fields	Protection of disciplinary pluralism; support for basic research and territorially strategic programmes
Third mission	Predominance of economic valorization and technology transfer	Reduction of public impact to brand reputation or market partnerships	Reframing in terms of social impact, citizen science, co-production of knowledge, and public engagement

In the final column, we have indicated several proposals that move in the direction of restoring a strong connection between the public university and the student community, the academic staff, and the technical-administrative personnel. The aim pursued within this number of *Sociologie* is to grasp the transformation of university institutions through a sociological perspective, but also to observe it through the concept of Public Sociology, which not only provides privileged tools for interpreting changes in university infrastructures – the forms of governance, evaluation mechanisms, internal hierarchies, and relationships with the State and the market – but does so by supporting its public dimension, that is, by taking as constitutive the relationship with differentiated publics, the translation between specialized languages and social worlds, and, above all, attention to conflicts and asymmetries of power (Burawoy 2007, 2009, 2020, 2021; Hossfeld, Brooke Kelly, Hossfeld 2021).

Within this perspective, public sociology can operate in three ways. As support, insofar as it provides conceptual and methodological tools to describe ongoing processes with precision: from the shift towards entrepreneurial governance to new regimes of access, from the transnational commodification of education to transformations of the third mission. As a framework, insofar as it re-situates these processes within a broader horizon of democracy, social justice, and responsibility towards non-academic publics: what appears technical – an indicator, a platform, a ranking, an admissions algorithm – is brought back to its nature as a device that redistributes power and voice among social groups (Power 1997; Shore, Wright 2000; Bruno, Didier 2013). Finally, as a critical stimulus, insofar as public sociology does not merely diagnose, but calls on the university to confront uncomfortable questions: who truly benefits from reforms? who remains excluded? which publics are listened to, and which, instead, are translated into mere administrative categories? (Gans 1988, 2009, 2016; Garavito 2014).

Following Burawoy’s approach, the point is not simply to invoke a generic “civil society,” but to recognize that publics are plural, conflictual, unequal, and traversed by different capacities for influence. Transposing this perspective from public sociology to the role of the university, it can be argued that a public university is not such merely by virtue of the

funding mechanisms that characterize it, but because it is itself capable of holding together three interrelated functions. An institutional function, which guarantees theoretical and empirical rigor, scientific quality, and the autonomy of validation criteria proper to disciplinary communities. A policy function, which contributes, through data, analysis, and proposals, to the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, without being reduced to a mere executor of external mandates. And a public function in the strict sense, which participates continuously in public life by creating spaces for informed discussion on controversial issues and by recognizing the plurality of publics that may address it.

As editors, we therefore believe that the contributions collected in this issue show how public sociology offers the university not only a critical vocabulary, but also a project-oriented possibility. It helps to demonstrate that the future of the public university will not depend exclusively on the abstract alternative between State and market, but rather on the capacity to concretely redefine the relationships between governance and publics, between evaluation and justice, and between autonomy and responsibility. The public university cannot be reduced to a juridical-administrative or economic-organizational object, but requires the toolkit of public sociology to interrogate the ongoing transformations in governance, evaluation, and funding, and to assess the capacity of academic institutions to hold together scientific autonomy, responsibility towards the common good, and dialogue with plural and unequal publics – a capacity that is currently under pressure, but not yet definitively compromised.

If this perspective is adopted, the stakes immediately become more concrete and involve at least three interrelated dimensions of university life: governance, evaluation, and the institutional mission.

First, at the level of governance, the possibility remains open to counter the reduction of collegiality to a mere ritual and to build more substantive forms of participation. This does not imply denying the need for effective decision-making, but rather removing the category of efficiency from an exclusively managerial definition. More concretely, it entails interrogating the composition of governing bodies, the internal distribution of power, the role of external actors, and the possibility of including, in a non-symbolic way, students, territories, vulnerable groups, and publics that are currently marginalized in decision-making processes that matter.

Second, at the level of evaluation, what is at stake is not the abolition of all forms of accountability, but the critique of its metric monopoly. A public university cannot refuse to render account; it can, however, challenge the idea that quality coincides exclusively with what rankings, citations, audits, and performance indicators are able to capture. Hence the need to experiment with more plural metrics, capable of registering not only scientific impact in the strict sense, but also contributions to the reduction of inequalities, territorial responsibility, the capacity to create spaces for democratic learning, and the production of knowledge over the long term.

Third, at the level of the institutional mission, it is possible to move the third mission beyond the alternative between residuality and entrepreneurialization. If interpreted in terms of social impact, participation, and co-production, it can become one of the arenas

in which the university recomposes the link between research, teaching, and citizenship. In this direction, sociology – especially in its public orientation – can play a leading role, both through its capacity to interpret asymmetries of access and power, and through its ability to construct languages that are translatable across different worlds.

At a time in which the university tends increasingly to be measured by its capacity to position itself within educational markets and international rankings, the task of sociologists is to recall that another question exists, no less decisive: which university, for which knowledge, and for whom (Burawoy 2007)? The pages that follow show that this question does not belong to the repertoire of an external critique, but constitutes the very core of any serious reflection on the public university as an institution removed from mere market rationality. If this issue succeeds in reopening this question in terms of a scientifically grounded and publicly relevant discussion, it will already have contributed to freeing the fate of the university from the false self-evidence of metrics alone and of purely competitive imperatives.

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