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DIE FREIRAUMSCHAFFENDE
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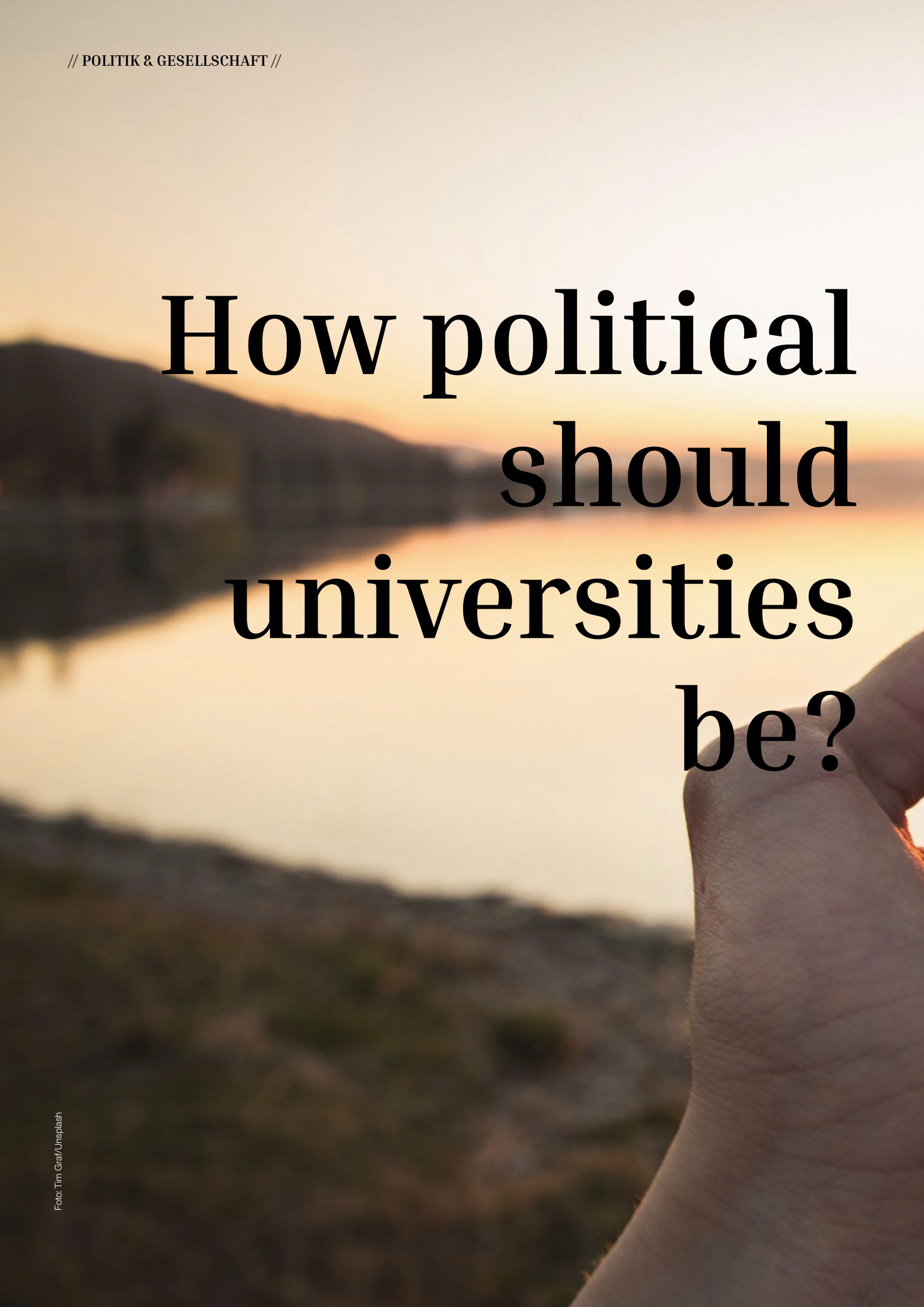
How political should universities be?



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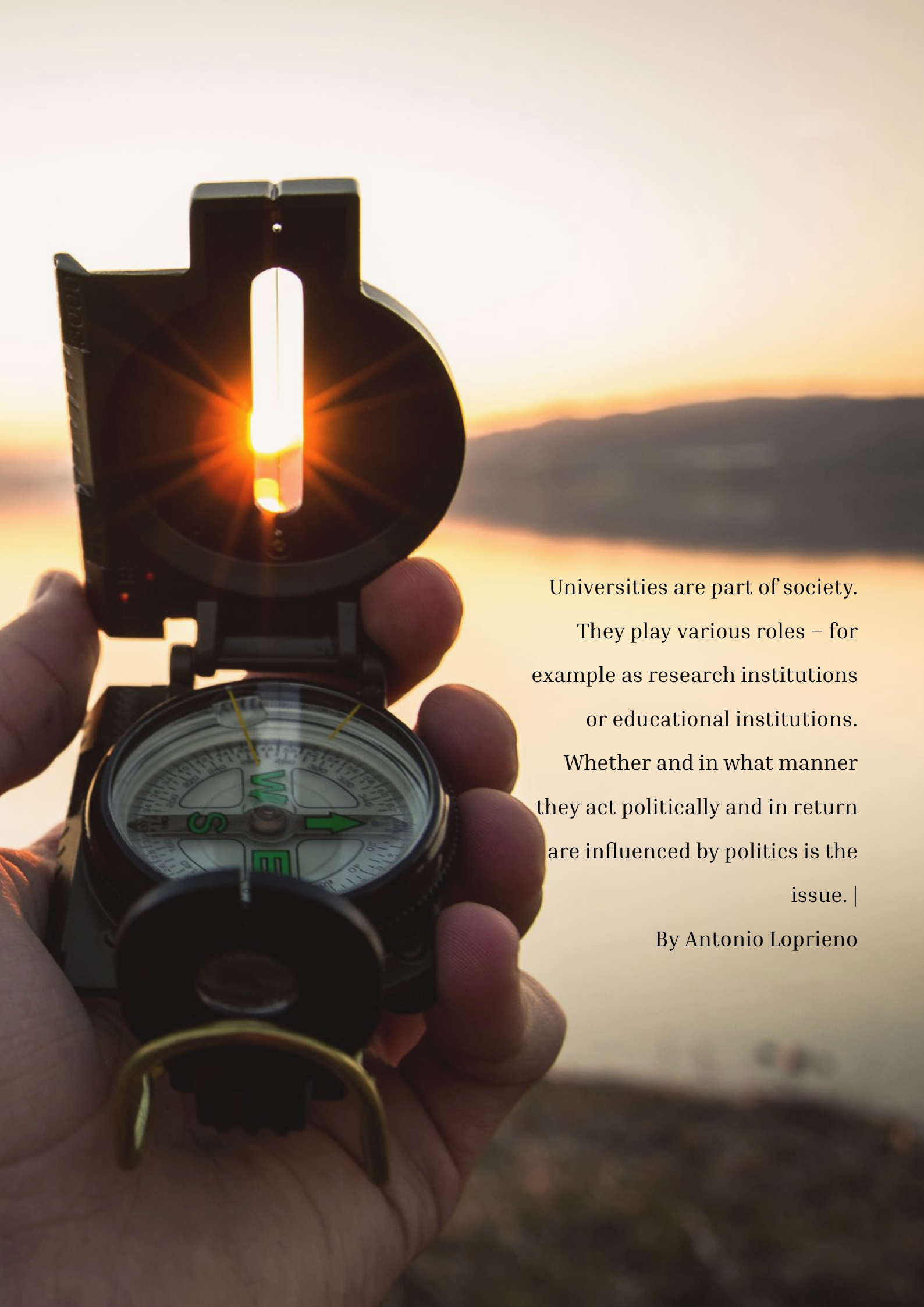

Universities are part of society. They play various roles – for example as research institutions or educational institutions. Whether and in what manner they act politically and in return are influenced by politics is the issue. |

By Antonio Loprieno

Foto: Uni Basel

Prof. Dr. Antonio Loprieno

teaches the history of institutions at the University of Basel and is President of All European Academies (ALLEA).| *a.loprieno@unibas.ch*

Quellenhinweis

Die Rede von Prof. Dr. Antonio Loprieno bildete den Auftakt zum Global University Leaders Council Hamburg. Das Council ist eine gemeinsame Initiative der Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, der Körber-Stiftung und der Universität Hamburg und fand 2019 zum dritten Mal statt. Zentrales Anliegen ist es, den Prozess der weltweiten Hochschulentwicklung bewusst zu gestalten.

In early 2016, after having served for about ten years as president of the University of Basel, I spent a sabbatical at the University of Cape Town (UCT). At that time, the university leadership was facing a resurgence of the #RhodesMustFall movement that the year before had led to the removal of the statue of the university's benefactor, which was located in visible position in the center of the UCT campus. Within my own academic culture, forged as it is by Max Weber's separation between science and politics, I interpreted the events I was observing around me as a blatant example of political pressure on the university. But was this really the case? Or was much more the university, which also contributes actively to the societal context in which it is embedded, reacting in a constructive way to the legitimate concerns of its main constituency?

At the same time, my home university in Switzerland was experiencing a debate which, while certainly less momentous at the global level than the distribution of educational chances in South Africa, was not free of interesting institutional implications. One of its two funding bodies, the cantons that legally own the university and appoint its governing board, announced that financial reasons compelled it to reduce its contribution to the university's budget in the next funding period and at the same time prompted the university to align its strategy with the government's expectations, e.g. by consolidating what it considered too broad an academic portfolio. The university community interpreted this decision unanimously as an illegitimate political intervention, and university leaders reminded the state that the advantages brought about by the university for the local economy outweigh by far the state's contribution to the university budget. But was this political intervention by the canton genuinely inappropriate? Should it not be accepted that a democratically elected state government prioritize its expenditures within the boundaries of the expected tax revenues and of its electorate's mandate?

These two arbitrarily chosen episodes shed light on the variety of ways in which we look at the university from historical and institutional perspectives and assess the appropriateness of its ties with the political sphere. In the first instance, the issue at stake concerned the social setting of the university: is the university an institution, i.e. an educational structure with a certain degree of permanence that transcends individual lives and intentions, or an organization, i.e. an educational structure that pursues collective goals and whose success is primarily determined by its stakeholders' satisfaction? In the second instance, we were dealing with an issue of governance: do we view the university as an association governed by its members (faculty and students), or as a company governed by its shareholders (state, funding agencies)? So, how political should universities be? The answer will necessarily be a flexible one and depend on what I would call the university's *„social contract"*, on the dynamic position the academic institution has come to occupy in the society in which it is embedded.

A question of function

Through the 18th century, European universities were sites for the propagation of professorial knowledge, formally founded by the Church but mostly funded by the local rulers or elites. They were politically legitimated, and (I would say provocatively) therefore institutionally autonomous establishments. They were autonomous entities because they

also had jurisdictional power. And for very good reasons: they emphasized teaching, and in all branches of knowledge (hence the expression *universitas studiorum*) utilitarian ties to professional status were in the foreground. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment contributed to the end of this Medieval type of university, which after the Reformation had become very confessional and parochial, and rather saw in a new type of institution, variously called "academy" or "learned society", the best place for the development of the New Science, as Giambattista Vico called it.

Then in the 19th century, three comparable, but culturally very different, university reform movements established themselves in the Western world and shaped our understanding of the social function of this institution down to the end of the 20th century. They were the German Humboldt model, the Anglo-Saxon liberal arts education, and the French *grande école*. Humboldt's educational model privileged disciplinary contents (*Wissenschaft*) and viewed education as a transmission of a disciplinary perspective (*Fach*) to students as future academics. The Anglo-Saxon model, especially as it developed under the influential writings of John Henry Newman, proceeded from a wider canon of cultural contents that, when absorbed by students, would generate in them good citizenship and prepare them for elite functions in society. The post-Napoleonian *grande école*, on the other hand, aimed at preparing the most gifted young people for state service though a curriculum based on engineering sciences. While none of these models had a specific political vocation and recognized, in different ways, the independence of knowledge from power, it is not difficult to realize, if we reject a naïve understanding of what constitutes academic freedom, that two of these reforms were very much rooted a specific political, state-based reading of the function of higher education in society. The least political, while at the same time the most culturally self-conscious, of the three models was certainly the Anglo-American liberal arts college, which viewed higher education in the light of society's common good.

Over the last twenty-five years, universities worldwide have undergone profound changes, leading to a global renegotiation of university culture at the crossroads of global politics and local policies. In Europe, as a result of the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) declarations, universities adopted the curricular architecture of the Anglo-Saxon bachelor-master sequence, but without adapting the contents of university education to the new architecture. All in all, European universities were happy with the existing educational model and developed in fact various forms of passive resistance, prompting an interesting dichotomy between on the one hand a political culture that for years kept stressing the advantages of the Bologna reform,

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without truly understanding it (there have been ministerial Bologna follow-up conferences since 1999, the next one is planned for 2020), and on the other hand an academic culture echoing Penelope's pretension to be weaving a shroud during daytime only to undo it at night. We kept declaring that the goals of the reform had been successfully reached, which was only true from a formal point of view of the architecture of studies, while circumventing, if not downright rejecting its principles in daily academic life. As a result, continental university education has remained fundamentally disciplinary and consecutive (i.e. without substantial vertical mobility after the bachelor's degree), and the masters' degree has maintained its status as prototypical academic achievement.

During the same time span, the Anglo-Saxon system has "gone global" and has been adopted by the emerging academic powers, especially in Asia. So, while the terminology and formal architecture of university education have merged worldwide, the old licenses, magisters, and diplomas having been superseded by bachelors and masters, the cultural divide in terms of values (citizenship vs. science) and of access (by selection vs. by entitlement) has been maintained and is indeed a distinctive feature of the continental European, as opposed to global academic landscape.

> *The cultural divide in terms of values and of access has been maintained.*

This cultural divide has consequences in terms of the political positioning (*Verortung*) of the university. In the Anglo-American (and now global) university culture it is uncontroversial that students' admission should be guided by the principle of selectivity, which is conceptually coupled with the idea that education is an investment justifying high tuition fees, and that the quality of a university is to a large extent contingent on, or measurable by, the quality of the student body it is able to attract. By contrast, continental European and post-colonial African academic cultures maintain a consensus, which in Europe goes back to the emergence of the New Left and the '68 events, and in Africa to the national liberation movements, that higher education is a right and that therefore tuition fees should be low, or in the fundamentalist German interpretation nonexistent. In this reading, higher education is a "political" right ideally to be exercised with as little selection as possible.

In the model of access based on selection, the student relates to the institution of higher education on the basis of a private contract, which makes the university the student's immediate socio-political referent: at Harvard, students recently protested against a particular candidate for a college dean's position on the basis of a political reading of the candidate's professional commitments, which we may well attribute to political correctness, but which is understandable within this logic in view of the fact that the college dean position is a community-based, not strictly speaking an academic appointment. On the contrary, in the case of access based on entitlement (e.g. simply by virtue of having obtained a high school diploma), the relationship between a student and the university is regulated by public law, which places the institution and its members on a par as equal objects of political decisions. In Baden-Württemberg, I chair an advisory board established by the Minister of Science to monitor the implementation of differential student fees for non-EU students. On this board, universities are represented together with state officials, community leaders, and church or student organizations, and so far I have not sensed any institutionally based distinction ("university" vs. "students") on the positions that are being negotiated.

Such an asymmetry in the relationship between students and institutions has two important consequences. First, universities that can select their students in the way Anglo-American or Asian universities do, operate in a global "education market" based on the dialectics of supply and demand, which is guided far more by the market's invisible hand than the classical European universities that do not have selective admissions. Second, in the Anglo-American approach more value is attached to the quality of teaching (e.g. through the existence of teaching colleges), whereas in the continental European approach the turn to institutional excellence has come to be almost exclusively identified with research achievements.

When trying to answer the question of how political universities should be, therefore, we should not forget that the cultural semantics of the terms involved varies profoundly depending on the language in which the question is asked: in English, the adjective "political" does not have the same connotations as "politique" in French or "politisch" in German, and the encompassing concept of "university" is semantically located somewhere in the middle between the French "université", which has had to fight for its status in a society in which another institution of higher education, the *grande école*, enjoyed socio-economic prominence, and the German Universität, which has established its cultural, scientific and professional supremacy in a regime of monopoly.

A question of institutions

We now turn to the political perspective on the university that I call "institutional" and that concerns the mission (what does that particular university stand for?) and the governance of the university (who are the owners of the academic project?). In the Anglo-Saxon model, the ideal university is a "campus" which sees itself *as* a city, as a location of institutional identity and community building, whereas in continental Europe the model of the university *in* the city prevails. Anglo-American institutions, whether private or public, engage in political discourse and meet with decision-makers as potentially equal partners, whereas continental universities, because of their politically founded historical origin as well as their almost exclusive dependence on state funding, tend to view themselves as object, rather than as subject, of political discourse. This is why a president of Harvard is more likely to be pushed out of office for political reasons ("political" in its societal sense), as was the case with Larry Summers in 2006, than a politically incorrect president of a European university, in whose case one would immediately suspect illegitimate political intervention and the adjective "political" would be interpreted in its governmental sense. As long as the prevailing political culture is inspired by the values of Enlightenment and liberalism, academia operates on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in what is viewed as a kind of autonomy from political influence. But when politics turn from liberalism to populism, things change in both academic cultures, as one can easily see in the case of the fate of the humanities in the US or of Gender Studies in Hungary.

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If we try, once again, to represent the binary institutional setting of a university in the form of a quadrant, we might want to juxtapose the axis of mission, which goes from a focus on education to a focus on its impact, and the axis of governance, which determines whether the university relies more heavily on its stakeholders' regulations or on the sense of ownership developed by the academic community. The institutional locus somewhere on this quadrant, filled with four prototypical examples, also determines the amount of political influence, and political correctness, to which the university and its leadership are exposed. A university under strong stakeholders' control (regardless of the difference between private and public funding, which seems to me to exert relatively little impact on the university's mission and governance), who expect to have a say in defining academic policies, and more oriented toward the (scientific, social or economic) translational engagement, will necessarily have to act in a politically more conscious manner than the rectorate of a classical post-68 German committee university, which will rather concentrate on mediating between different centers of academic power. This applies all the more so to a liberal arts American college such as the College of William & Mary, where undergraduate students can design their own individual curriculum.

But even the focus on an educational, rather than translational mission does not free the university from the need to respond dialectically to political decisions. To understand this, let us take a closer look at the recent history of European higher education. At the beginning of the 21st century, in the wake of the Bologna reform, European universities decided more or less spontaneously to devote special attention to educational issues, and particularly to domain of tea-

ching, that had been programmatically neglected in the Humboldt model. This was the time of the creation of a European Higher Education Area, of the development of joint degrees and of the support of large-scale student mobility (e.g. through the Erasmus program). The focus on teaching was paired with an institutional stress on the narrative of "autonomy", which was prompted by the fact that at the same time European universities were universally experiencing a form of emancipation from tight political control and a shift toward the consolidation of academic decisions in the hands of a stronger central leadership than had been the case before. This is indeed a form of "autonomy", however one with a particular semantic reading of this word, which does not include, for example, the privilege to choose between different sources of income. The

> *The financial backbone of European universities remained predominantly the public hand.*

financial backbone of European universities remained predominantly, and in many cases solely, the public hand, and its funding basically came without (or with very few) strings attached. What kind of autonomy can you truly aspire to in view of financial dependence? We shall return to this issue in a moment.

Over the last ten years, however, a dramatic change has taken place which has increased the number of strings attached to the university's public funding. The traditional logic of co-optation, which saw academic institutions linked by a sort of common understanding of academic prestige and of interinstitutional solidarity, has been gradually replaced by the logic of competition, in which the university's performance becomes measurable and other universities may be viewed as potential partners, but also as potential rivals. The necessity to provide empirical indicators of the university's performance has pulled research ever closer to the center of attention of both university leaders and political actors. Based on the increasing power of the rankings, and despite regular questioning of their actual information content, an orientation around scientific "excellence" has established itself through government programs in countries as diverse as Germany, France, Canada or Japan. This has given yet another competitive advantage to the model of a globalized world-class university.

But if the Bologna reform and the creation of an EHEA were themselves eminently political decisions, the shift of primary institutional attention from egalitarian-leaning teaching to competitively funded research made the fate of higher education institutions even more dependent on political decision-making. Let's take the German "Exzellenzinitiative" (and the same holds true for the French "Investissements d'avenir" or for the English "Research Assessment Framework"): while the success of the institutions was and is almost solely based on academic merits and, therefore, is not "political" in the common sense of the word, to establish this type of competitive logic in higher education was ostensibly the result of a political will to put a certain number of national universities on the map of the global rankings. This move is generally taken to have positively dynamized the German and the French university system as a whole, and it has certainly proved a blessing for the successful universities themselves. The same could be argued about the role of ERC grants in determining many European universities' academic choices.

Let us now turn to the translational side of the axis of the university's mission. What does the term "political" mean in this case? A university with strong collaborations with private industry will necessarily have to respond to the political expectation that it should contribute to local economy in countries as diverse as China and Switzerland, in spite of the objective differences in their political culture, much more than one that shares research facilities teams with a Max Planck Institute or benefits from a large philanthropic endowment. In terms of the university's mission, political pressures on the university to adapt its curricular offerings to socio-economic priorities may therefore prove more useful than benign (or malign) political neglect, as shown by the qualitative leap of the Chinese universities as opposed to the ever-shrinking number of public colleges in the US.

A question of typology

A third aspect in which the answer to the issue of the legitimacy of politics in the university requires a dif-

Foto: Edwin Andrare/Unspalsh

ferentiated answer concerns university typology. Over the last twenty years, the global academic landscape has experienced a transition process that Max Weber would have called a *Vergesellschaftung*, a transformation from an endogenous, community-based academic *Gemeinschaft* to an exogenous, stakeholder-based understanding of the role of universities. Processes and decisions that used to be only rooted within the academic community have gradually acquired social relevance and visibility: universities worldwide have become more autonomous in their academic and administrative decisions, but also more exposed to institutional scrutiny by their respective governing bodies, whether private or public. In those cases, particularly in the European academic culture, in which identity and sense of ownership were mainly derived from the field of study (I derive my professional pride first of all from being an Egyptologist), university autonomy has led to a shift to an institutional sense of ownership (I derive my professional pride first of all from being a faculty member of the University of Basel). This was usual in the Anglo-Saxon educational systems, but in Europe, before this cultural turn, it only applied to institutions with a strong ideological or professional identity, such as the (Catholic) University of Fribourg, the (economic) University of St. Gallen or the (technical) ETH in Switzerland. Finally, the inevitable, but universally disliked price-tag of institutional autonomy is that universities need to develop controlling, accounting, facilities, logistics, marketing, reporting much more extensively than the old conglomerate of sometimes small-size institutes.

After universities, in the wake of the Bologna reform, focused on teaching and competences and later shifted their institutional attention to research and excellence, in very recent years a new paradigm established itself as a motor of university development: "innovation". It is difficult to find a EUA report, a governmental program or a third-party funded project which does not consider innovation – whether in its narrower, economic sense or in its broader, social sense – a substantial part of the university's "third mission". What makes this shift ever more powerful is the fact that both endogenous and exogenous factors now prompt the university to assume a leading role in the regional ecosystem: local economy through knowledge transfer and global science through the trend to interdisciplinarity and global challenges have both contributed to add "innovation" to the university's original two missions, teaching and research. This expansion of the university's core functions generates attention to new forms of societal leadership, less focused on the traditional type of knowledge and more on the development of entrepreneurial skills among students and faculty. In this sense, we are indeed experiencing

> *Universities have to intensify the collaboration with the main source of research funding in Europe.*

a momentous transformation of university, which reminds one of the epochal changes that took place with the transformation from the old to the modern university in the 19th century.

But the focus on innovation is of course a child of the economic and scientific globalization. It is indeed a "political" focus precisely in that it stresses the university's economic ties. The first move in this direction took place in the 90ies of the past century and led to institutional changes in the higher education landscape, such as the establishment of the universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) in the German speaking world or the abolishment of the distinction between universities and polytechnics in the UK in 1992. While the strategies of the classical universities in the first decade of the 21st century turned to competitive research and scientific excellence, the current "innovation turn" has made a particular type of university, the "technical university" (such as the EPFL in Switzerland or the TU München), which combines research excellence and societal impact, the most likely model of higher education to elicit political support, much in the vein of the success of the Pasteur quadrant in the development of application-oriented basic research. This also corresponds to the strategy followed by European science policy-makers for the next years: one need only think of the focus that the future framework program Horizon Europe lays on mission-based research, or perhaps also – but this may be pure coincidence – of the fact that the scientist chosen as Jean-Pierre Bourguignon's successor as ERC president at the helm of European research is an American trained medical nanotechnologist.

The universities' "third mission", therefore, clearly dovetails with the political desire to intensify the collaboration between the institutions of higher education and the main source of research funding in Europe, i.e. the private sector, especially the industry: Pharma, Biotech, Greentech, Artificial Intelligence, etc. In Germany or Switzerland, between 2/3 and 3/4 of the money invested in R&D is of corporate origin. And if view of limited public funding, it is crucial for universities that can afford investments in expensive research fields such as life sciences or computer sciences to orientate their strategy toward increasing corporate partnerships. Whenever the news of yet another research chair in collaboration with the industry is published, the university stresses, usually sincerely, that this new chair perfectly fits the university's long-standing strategy. But why does it rarely happen that a university rejects the collaboration for not fitting its strategy? Because the university, in this case, is being political – in its own interest and in the interest of society's common good.

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that the state as it appears in the current university context in post-industrial societies is not any longer an inflexible, bureaucratic machinery, but has rather turned into what the UCL economist M. Mazzucato calls the "entrepreneurial state". Mazzucato has shown that we should not look at the public hand only as a hindrance, but also indeed as the real source of innovation that precedes private investments. The state is itself a factor of innovation in that it finances research programs that foster an innovation agenda. The ERC Council in Brussels, CERN in Geneva or the supersensitive telescope MeerKAT in South Africa would have been unthinkable without political will and massive investments of public money. We now hear that ERC horizon Europe should become more mission-based. Is this a political intervention? Of course it is! And what should universities say? No thank you, it infringes on our autonomy? A fundamentalist anti-political approach, therefore, runs against the best interest of an entrepreneurial university. The critical mass of research groups in specific disciplines and the importance of research in networks benefit from state-funded research initiatives, thus shaping scientific progress much more effectively than if decisions were all delegated to the level of the single research groups.

The gradual differentiation of the higher-education sector which has taken place in Europe, therefore, has generated different types of typological identities in addition to the classical university model. These new

institutions differ from the traditional model of university, be it in their ownership (in the case of private universities in a traditionally public higher-education sector) or in their academic programs (in the case of the universities of applied sciences in German-speaking countries or the new university colleges in England), in that they concentrate on specific educational needs, generally dovetailing with the expectations of the labor market. Thus, the organizational and academic autonomy is counterbalanced by an increased strategic attention to the political and economic context, since many of the university's stakeholders entertain different notions of what its mission actually entails.

The university's "fourth mission" in the age of simulation

For universities worldwide, however, the most difficult political engagement lies ahead of us. The technological, and now socio-cultural innovation that has come to be known as the "digital turn" has also opened up a new way of accessing knowledge that for

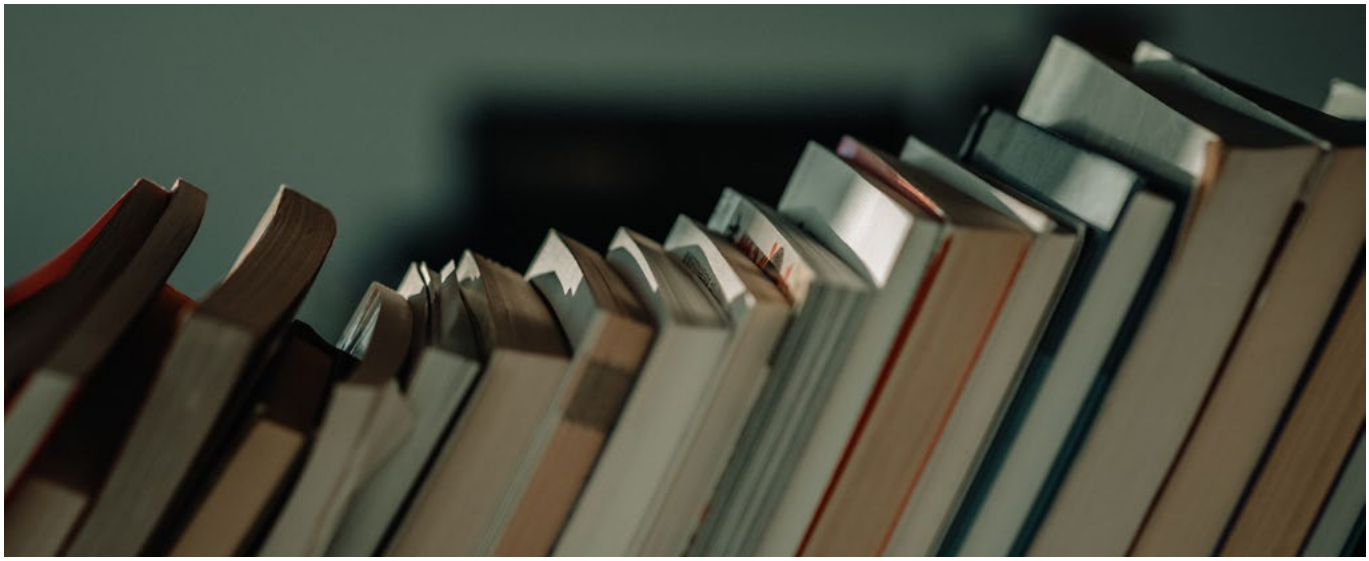

Foto: Jason Wong/ Unsplash

universities bears both tremendous scientific potential and worrying dangers: simulation. Visual representations rouse our emotions more than written texts; learning in the digital age is always complemented by images and imagination. More than ever before, transmitting information through digital simulation blurs the boundaries of scientific visualization, literary fiction and intentional fraud.

Simulations have pushed our analog access to knowledge to the margins. They offer a challenge to the existing rules of information, art and science. Because the essence of simulation is not to reproduce a historical, social or scientific reality, but to visualize the connections between fragments of information. And it is precisely in this cognitive shift that lies the potential contact between simulation and the post-factual. As scientific communities, in view of the generalized loss of trust, if not in scientific evidence per se, at least in the relevance of its representatives in the socio-political debate, universities should develop a "fourth mission" which consists in offering trustworthy orientation to society in dealing with the scientific advantages, but also with the cognitive dangers of digitally transmitted information. This is an eminently political function that universities should embrace with open arms.

We simulate things in order to be able to demonstrate them more clearly than we can by analog means. But we also simulate in order to dissimulate things we'd rather leave unrecognized. Simulation is thus a means both of visualizing scientific processes and of distorting objective facts in the real world. The digital turn, therefore, has changed the way we access knowledge in three ways: knowledge has become more visual, more social, and more accessible. Knowledge that is conveyed through images is emotionally closer to us than is the case when it is conveyed by words alone. Digital knowledge is also more social than traditional forms because it is controlled and steered by a community – such

as that of the Wikipedia authors. And ultimately, digital knowledge is more accessible than its analog forms because we can assimilate and manage large volumes of data in a minimal amount of time.

But is it truly "knowledge" that is becoming more visual, more social and more accessible through digitalization? Or is it just "information"? If fragments of information need to be consolidated into real knowledge, then communicating them alone is not enough. Above all, information fragments need to be amalgamated and bundled. When not embedded in an adequate context, an "encyclopedia", as semioticians would call it, digitally transmitted fragments of information lose their potentially authoritative power and can be easily manipulated. Digital knowledge is readily accessible, but only in an undisciplined form. Therefore, the boundary between knowledge and fake news or deep fakes has to be monitored very carefully, and universities should take it upon themselves to discipline this process.

This is also why we speak of 'disciplines' when discussing scientific and scholarly categories. In this sense, there lurks an ordering logic behind each fragment of knowledge – an analog algorithm that enables us to differentiate plausible information from the implausible in a "disciplined" fashion. Behind disciplined knowledge there is a belief in its plausibility, which is what separates it from undisciplined, accidental findings, conspiracy theories and so-called pure facts.

But how can we differentiate between disciplined knowledge and undisciplined fragments of information? By applying critical reason. For universities worldwide, the most dangerous exposure to political manipulation does not come from direct governmental restrictions or economic pressures (although of course, as we saw, there are many instances where it indeed does), but it rather comes under the disguise of populist simplifications of scientific challenges. This is where I see the great potential, and indeed the need for a "fourth mission" of the university which transcends its present – or present past narrative of autonomy. In our work as researchers, teachers and in the science policies we promote, our primary task is to carry out plausibility control. Universities should be "political" in the sense of being able to steward the available abundance of undisciplined digital information and make it plausible for society in analog terms. Universities should be "political" in Aristotelian terms, i.e. by privileging the concerns of the "city" (polis), and succeed in taming simulation, disciplining it, and transforming it into socially trustworthy knowledge. An eminently political function.

In view of the development from individual to social knowledge and the danger represented by the populist drift, it seems to me that university leaders could also contribute to maintaining trust in science if they tried to always convey a clear sense of the functional, institutional and typological features of their own university and refrain from lazy statements that it always offers both: both excellence in science and impact on society, both teaching competence and innovation potential, both the support of young academics and the development of local economy. Of course in a sense we always do, but the general public needs to be informed at eye level about the dilemmas inherent in defining a modern university's strategy. As a societal stakeholder, the modern university is always both an autonomous community and a dedicated enterprise, but not both in all circumstances and at all costs. Depending on the issue at stake, it will have to bridge the first, second, third and fourth mission by relating to the political context in which it operates in order to sustain its pivotal role in public discourse. But it should be transparent on the direction of its overall mission, which will have to be readable as an institutional trajectory and distinctive in its strategic goals.

Thus, the answer to the question I was asked to discuss cannot be univocal, but is unavoidably rooted in the cultural, institutional and economic reality in which each university is embedded. How political should universities be? It depends on the unwritten social contract that ties together university and society. Within this social contract, the university should be as political as it takes in order to successfully fulfill its societal mission and implement its specific goals; and it should remain as unpolitical as it can in order to maintain its institutional autonomy and secure its academic community's sense of ownership. But above all: the university should be as politically engaged as it takes to provide leadership in upholding the values of the Enlightenment in the age of simulation. //

Herausgeber:
Dr. Wolfgang Heuser, Tel.: 030 212987-29,
w.heuser@duz-medienhaus.de

Beirat:
Andrea Frank, Leiterin des Programmbereichs „Forschung, Transfer und Wissenschaftsdialog", Stifterverband;
Prof. Dr. Monika Jungbauer-Gans, Wissenschaftliche Geschäftsführung, Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung (DZHW);
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Prof. Dr. Frank Ziegele, Geschäftsführer, CHE Centrum für Hochschulentwicklung

Redaktion:
Angelika Fritsche (afri), Redaktionsleitung
Tel.: 030 212987-37, a.fritsche@duz-medienhaus.de
Marion Koch (mko), Tel.: 030 212987-36,
m.koch@duz-medienhaus.de
Gudrun Sonnenberg (gs), Tel.: 030 212987-34,
g.sonnenberg@duz-medienhaus.de
Anne-Katrin Jung (akj), Redaktionsassistenz, Bildredaktion
Tel.: 030 212987-39, a.jung@duz-medienhaus.de

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Ständige Autoren und Mitarbeiter:
Tina Bauer (tb), Benita von Behr (bvb), Johannes Fritsche (jo), Dr. Elisabeth Holuscha, Andrea Puppe (apu), Veronika Renkes (kes), Dr. Ute Symanski, Ingrid Weidner (iw), Prof. Dr. Frank Ziegele

Verantwortlich gemäß Pressegesetz:
Angelika Fritsche, Berlin (für den redaktionellen Inhalt)

Anzeigen:
Stefanie Kollenberg (Leitung), Dr. Markus Verweyst,
Tel.: 030 212987-31, Fax: -30, anzeigen@duz-medienhaus.de
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Marketing:
Niklas Heuser, Tel.: 030 212987-21,
n.heuser@duz-medienhaus.de

Corporate Publishing und DUZ Special:
Stefanie Kollenberg, Tel.: 030 212987-12, Fax: -30,
s.kollenberg@duz-medienhaus.de

Kundenservice:
Simone Ullmann (Leitung), Tel.: 030 212987-51, Fax: -30,
kundenservice@duz-medienhaus.de

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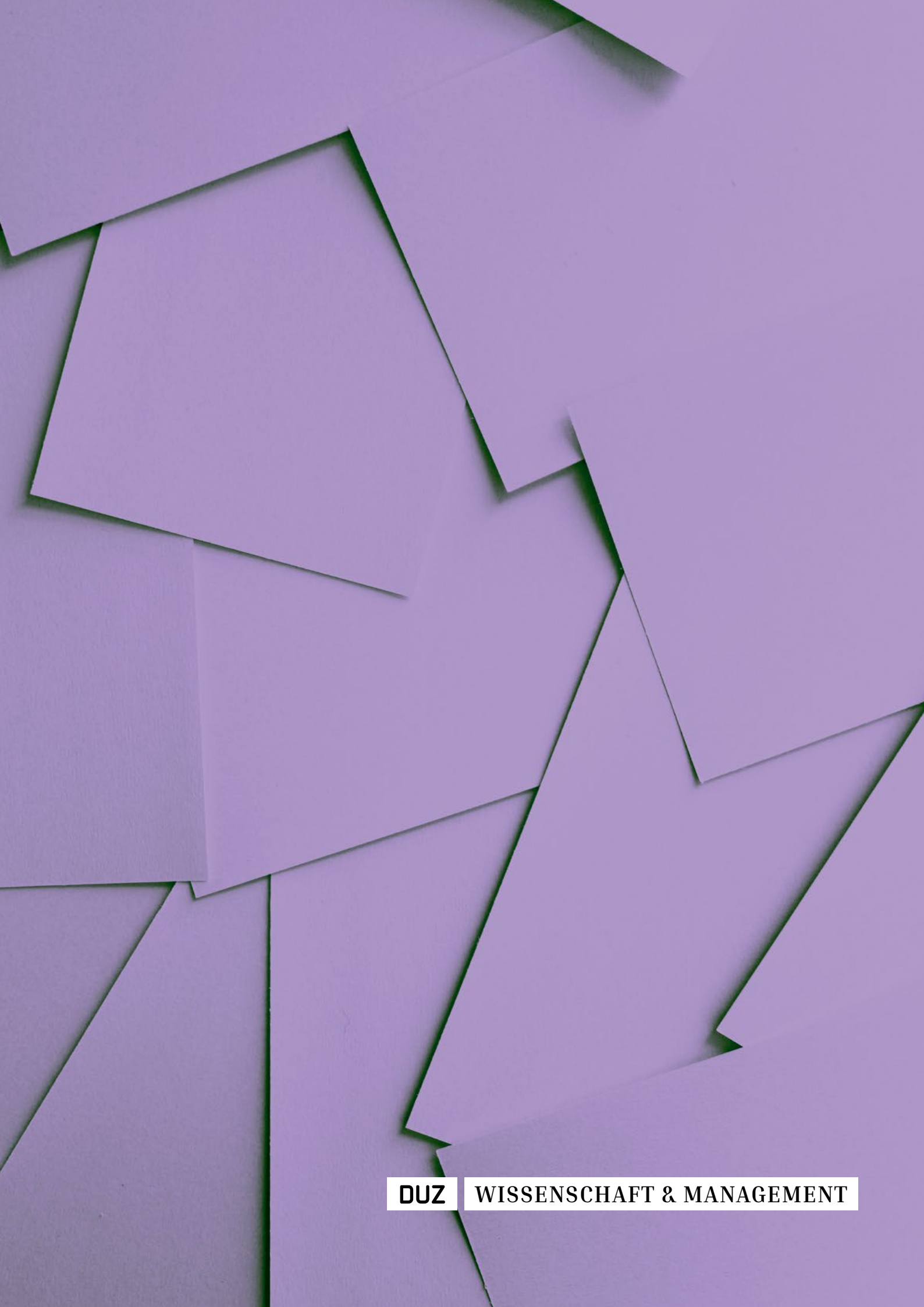

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