



## Agere and prodesse

Ivano Dionigi  
Rector  
Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna

*“There are two commonwealths (two res publicae) – the smaller one and the the greater one-: the smaller one is the town, the city, where we have been born; the greater one is the universe, which includes the whole mankind, until the borders designed by the sun. Some yield service to both commonwealths at the same time – to the lesser one and to the greater one – some only to the lesser, some only to the greater. But how can we contribute and benefit to the greater commonwealth? The greater commonwealth we are able to serve even in leisure (otium) – nay, I am inclined to think, even better in leisure (otium).” (Seneca, De otio, IV, 1-2)*

I chose this famous passage of the ancient philosopher Seneca since it is very close to my studies and it has, at the same time, some symbolic very modern meaning in our society.

Seneca talks about the constant tension of our political engagement between the anagraphical city and the universal city (Augustin will say: between the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly – *civitas terrena, civitas caelestes*).

The *res publica maior* needs a different kind of citizenship, not just that of the *civis*: the citizen, but that of the *sapiens*, the wise, the person capable of discerning. Because – Seneca continues - we need to ask ourselves broader questions: about politics, about ethics, about nature, about physics, cosmology, theology.

The *civis* (the citizen) is engaged in acting immediately for the improvement of the small context, of the ‘city’, *the res publica minor*; the *sapiens* can act on the higher global dimension of the *res publica maior*, the greater interconnected commonwealth. For this, the *sapiens* acts thanks to a special dimension, the dimension of the *otium*.

*Otium* is a latin word of complex semantic, with multiple overlapping meanings, it is the withdrawing from daily business (from the *negotia*), the free space and time to think, to study, to take a distance from the busy everyday life, it is the space for discerning, producing and transmitting knowledge.

And Seneca tells us here that *otium* is not a closed and private separate space and time.

He tells us that it can have a higher civic and political function, since we need a free space apart to think, to ask and answer questions about values, people, life, nature and art. So to be able to understand and transform the world. The knowledge in Seneca is namely dynamic in two important dimensions: that of the *agere*: to act and that of the *prodesse*: to benefit.



Universities can and should be *res publicae maiores*, the greater commonwealth: places for thinking understanding and transforming the world, and places where the Universal city becomes visible.

For this reason today I invited especially you, our international students:

I give you the warmest welcome in our community. I thank you for coming here: keep in mind please that through your special outlook, through your *sapientia*, our classrooms will better achieve their duty to rise awareness in the world that there is no more sense in engaging for our *res publica minor* if we do not engage in the same time for the *res publica maior*. We need to act with a broader and deeper awareness of the complexity of interconnections.

Universities are protected free places in which we create knowledge, a kind of knowledge able to transform, to enable us performing “acts of citizenship”.

These “acts of citizenship” will extend the boundaries of belonging to a polity and enable the wider and wider peoples’ claims for justices, rights and equality.

Today we remember the students of Garissa University College, the loss of one hundred forty eight lives and future. They have been deprived of their *agere*, that is to say, their capacity to act for their own future, the wellbeing of their families and communities.

But the same time they have been deprived of the possibility of acting as *sapientes*: studying becoming teachers and build other free spaces of *otium*. Their possibility of *prodesse*, of contributing - through research and education - to the development of the *maior res publica* - the greater commonwealth, to which we all belong, has been taken away.

Their loss is everyone loss, is our loss.