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Academic freedom, Autonomy, the State and the Public Sphere: pitfalls and possibilities – an ecological perspective

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Introduction

- Origin of this seminar
- A huge set of topics
- Only scratching the surface
- A personal view
- Not the result of any scholarship for this occasion
- But a bringing together of some of my reading/ thinking over 30 years
- & my own values and hopes for the university in the C21
- My own approach: a conceptual, critical, imaginary but realist social phil of HE.

A recent news item

- A recent news item
- Exhibits
 - (a) institutional autonomy
 - (b) academic freedom
 - (c) no tight relationship between university & state
 - (d) promotion of public sphere
- The story shows the interweaving of these four elements
- But what are their inter-connections?
- Is one more important than the others?

Academic freedom

- NB: Recent 400+ pp volume (Bilgrami and Cole, 2015)
- But can we any longer speak sensibly of academic freedom?
- Should we not speak of the conditions of academic work (ac labour)?
- Every act, every utterance, in any jurisdiction, is now subject to conditions
- - the state, audit agencies, professional bodies, dataflows, rankings, cross-national fashions, private sector interests, industry, the student estate ...
- 'Academic Freedom' grew out of totally different settings in the past.
 - Separateness of the ac community; now, *total inter-connectedness*.
- The term is falling away – & understandably so.
 - 'there is no university without condition – academic freedom is always a conditional freedom.'
(Stiegler, SofS, 170)
- However, it retains a signalling function, not least in a 'post-truth' age, and one in which the state assumes powers over the academy.

Institutional autonomy

- Again, a picture of inter-connectedness, and again across the world
- Of flows, but flows rushing into each other
- A liquid world, but torrents colliding
- Universities subject to direct and indirect powers exerted towards them
- Not just the state; the university is now interconnected with the world (including public opinion, which can be manipulated – eg Bath).
- Power plays
- (Different institutions have different spaces for their ‘autonomy’, if there is any at all)
- Another term to be treated with care
- 5 & perhaps ditched.

Corporate agency

- List and Pettit – idea that an institution as such can have agency
- They spell out the internal conditions
 - But neglect institutional will/ imagination/ spirit/ courage/ nous
- And neglect the external conditions
- To what extent is there space for universities to exhibit their own agency?
- Many are pessimistic ('proletarianization' – Halsey)
- But that turns a blind eye to matters in the 'real' world
- Universities – at least in some cases – could be said to exercise some agency? But where/ how?

Signs of corporate agency

- Distinguish authentic from inauthentic agency.
- An institution may simply be following the path that is set for it. ('inauthentic')
- Actually becoming – for the first time – an 'ideological state apparatus'
- Corporate agency – evident when an institution strikes out on its own
- Against the ideological currents of the age
- Or at least parallel to them
- But what would such authentic agency look like?

The State

- Little in the way of a consensus over the concept and theory of the state
 - But the concept and theory of the state largely neglected in HE studies
- Hardt & Negri (Lenin): a stage theory, thro nation state to imperialist state.
 - The state ‘had to transform the multitude into a people’. Now, surely, the state is manufacturing peoples – divide and rule: cf HE.
- Debate as to the substance of the idea of the ‘(post) capitalist state’
 - The state is enlarging HE by enlarging markets
- But, as with the economy generally, the state is being challenged by large corporations which are also enlarging their stake in higher education
 - And leading universities are often working with the large corporations
 - 8 – & becoming an agent of global capitalism.

The state and higher education

- The state & HE – a complex of forces, institutions, bureaucracies
- It is increasingly ‘colonizing’ higher education
- Through direct and through ideological power
 - Tapper and Salter – ‘economic ideology’
- Of audits, there shall be no end
- Sponsoring ‘private’ universities & pushing ‘public’ universities to markets
- Hierarchies; selectivity; co-opting university ‘leaders’;
- Bending epistemologies – decline in humanities; ‘skills’ agenda
- Orchestrating debate – ‘employability’, ‘private benefits’
- Trans-national initiatives – Europe/ United Nations/ World Bank ...
- Increasingly marking the boundaries of academic territory.

Public sphere

- The very term ‘public sphere’ appears (in translation) in Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* – 1962.
- NB: The concept also been implicit in MacIntyre’s work in his recalling of ‘an educated public’
- Arendt talked of the public realm, separate from the private realm – and both were disappearing thanks to the ever-widening social sphere
 - No longer a realm free of necessity
- But we await (?) an up-to-date idea of the public sphere, in an internet age, an age of ‘social media’, of ‘citizen scientists’ and ‘citizen scholars’
- ie, an age of multiple publics.

Public sphere and the university

- We await a full and adequate account of the PS and the university
- Work in Leuven by Masschelein and Simons may bear fruit, building on the idea of the lecture as a public event
- Pusser wants to see the university as itself a public space.
- But we need both a concept and a theorisation of the potential – at least – for the university to reach out to and help to develop multiple publics.
 - ie, forms of publics; modes of connections and relationships
- Resources: eg, Finnegan's 'beyond the University walls' is a help.
- Ideas of co-production, widened to university-society rels.
- A re-assertion of the university as a space of reason (Bakhurst).

Powers and spaces

- We need a theory of spaces and constraints (esp university-state rels)
- Some nations: the university and the state are in a state of mutual antagonism (Turkey?)
- In others, the university largely falls in with a project of state capitalism (China? Russia?)
- In others, the university largely falls in with 'the regulated state' (Western and market-driven nations)
- In others, the university and the state stand in complex relationships of mutual tension (Africa? South America?)
- So the spaces and powers available to universities vary profoundly

Preliminary summary: the state of scholarly play - & elephant traps

- Some tendencies in contemporary scholarship in higher education studies
 - Especially in relation to the university
 - Doom and gloom
 - Debate over academic freedom is insufficiently realist
 - We lack an serious theory of institutional autonomy
 - We have no theory or concept of corporate agency
 - We lack a theory of the idea of the state that both takes on board modern scholarship on the state and state-HE relationships (Hook et al, 1978;T&S1994)
 - We have an insufficient theorisation or concept of the public sphere – eg that seriously brings Habermas up-to-date, in relation to HE
- 13 • NB: different logics of research and teaching.

New beginnings – resources

- Assemblage theory (Deleuze/ Guattari; DeLanda)
 - *Beyond and across higher education systems*
- Ideas of:
 - *Ideological state apparatus (Althusser) – now coming back*
 - *Entanglement*
- Cognitive capitalism (Boutang; Peters)
 - *Already has its own critiques*
- Ecosystems (Guattari – ecological registers)
 - *Material and symbolic components*
 - *Deterritorialisation*

Realism is not enough

- Realism – that there is a world independent of our ideas of it
- We are then plunged into accounts of the way of the world
- Bhaskar – a radical and strident ontology – empirical, actual and real
- Difficulties for higher education and universities, BUT:
- Layers – eg beneath and across higher education
- National and global forces playing out
 - ‘global capitalism’, ‘cognitive capitalism’, even ‘globalisation’: indications of our ignorance
 - Sense of doom and crisis – ‘*The University in Ruins*’ (Readings) – a ‘critical’ literature
- But the layerings and criss-crossing hide/ reveal spaces

Bernard Stiegler: *'The re-enchantment of the World'; 'States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century'; 'Critique of Political Economy'*

- Cognitive capitalism: a loss of 'spirit' – an 'ecological crisis of spirit' (90)
- '... no investment ... on behalf of those sectors that are the new spiritual instruments' (86)
- 'Today's public powers have largely declined to make a solvent economy of the world of knowledge independent of production' (87)
- 'A question of the ecology of spirit presents itself here' (88)
 - ... favouring the development of ... associated tendencies over their dissociative tendencies' (88)
- A 'pharmacological' perspective – both 'toxic' and 'therapeutic' potentials
- *'a new form of publicness in a public space in the service of a social organization always more and better equipped to ... create ... forms of knowledge and consciousness ... to improve the life of the spirit for the entire ... world.'*

An ecological perspective

- Ecology – a thick concept (Williams) – fact and value
- Ecosystems – hazy & fluid
 - Impaired
 - Mutual and dual ‘entanglements’
- Idea of ecology is value-laden
 - Towards which humanity has responsibilities (‘deep ecology’)
 - [NB: much talk of the Anthropocene and ‘post-humanism’
 - A displacement of humanity]

The ecological university

- 7 ecosystems
 - Knowledge, social institutions, persons, learning, economy, culture, & the natural environment. (Debate focuses just on the economy.)
- Impaired
- To which the university has responsibilities
- Hedged in
- But spaces for agency ('corporate agent' – L&P)
- 'Socialist knowledge' (Peters)
- 'Citizen scholars' (Armanitakis and Hornsby)
- 'The university without walls' (Finnegan)

Corporate agency & the imagination

- Corporate agency has to be won – it is not given
- A necessary element is that of the imagination
- (A university's corporate strategy is/ shd be a work of hopeful fictions)
- But the imagination is insufficient in itself
 - Ideas are not enough
 - Forms of the imagination – instrumental/ compliant/ resistant/ value-oriented
 - The ecological university orients itself towards not just repairing but advancing the ecosystems in which it is placed
 - A corporate imaginary for a better world.

Conclusions

- *Academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the public sphere* are intertwined with the *state*, nationally **and** globally
 - with elements of *power* at the different levels
 - including **within** the *university*
 - The state has the major powers but universities have (*agentic*) spaces
 - Those spaces may be growing
 - Spaces do not just exist or even emerge
 - but have to be discerned through the *imagination*
 - Imaginaries of the university have *value* elements
 - It is thro the imagination that '*therapeutic*' possibilities may be discerned and created (alongside the 'toxic')
 - We need 'empirical' research but we need
 - (a) theoretical 'research' and
 - (b) philosophical work to bring forward imaginative concepts that have a degree of *feasibility* to them. '*Ecology*' may just be one such concept.
- 20 - There is much to play for.



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