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The University as a Critical Institution: an ecological sighting

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The 'research question' of this paper

- **Can any sense be attached to the notion of 'the university as a critical institution' ?**
 - And if so what might that be?

NB:

- This is a conceptual paper – 'What is it that we take a university to be?'

And a theoretical paper:

- What are the social conditions of the emergence of the university as a critical institution?

Some preliminary distinctions

- 'University'/ 'higher education'
- Being critical in the university/ being critical *of* the university
- Internal criticality (within the university) and external criticality (in the relationships between the university and the wider world)
- University qua institution/ university qua idea
- The university being critical in society/ being critical *to* society.

On the basis of those distinctions:

In this paper, I am concerned almost entirely – tho not completely – with:

- 1 the university (rather than with higher education)
- 2 its own criticality – not in criticisms turned on the university
- 3 *both* its internal criticality and external criticality
- 4 primarily, the university as an institution (*but* will also keep an eye on the university as an idea)
- 5 the university being critical in society – but I hope to show how the university might be critical *to* society.

Background – some features

- State-university relationships (cf Turkey, China, Japan, South Africa, Chile, UK, USA)
- Massive global deep structures/ steering mechanisms
 - ‘Cognitive capitalism’
 - Neoliberalism
 - World rankings
 - Regional superstructures
 - Digital age
- The university moves and has its being in awkward spaces (which have a constraining effect)

An earlier proposal (1997)

- That critical thinking is not enough
- To (1) CT we need to add
 - (2) 'dispositions' towards critical thinking – critical being
and
 - (3) critical 'action' (a will to enact CT)
- Together, these three components amount to (a neologism of mine!)
'criticality'
- We need to see whether and how far this triple schema has application here, in relation to the university as an institution.

7 forms of institutional criticality

- 1 Uncovering the deep structures – ‘steering mechanisms’ – of the world
- 2 Widening public understanding, enhancing critical citizenship
- 3 Being a space for critical debate
- 4 Identifying ‘absences’ in the world
- 5 Academics as public critical intellectuals
- 6 Exemplifying critical discourse
- 7 Developing students’ ‘criticality’ (‘higher education’)

An immediate ploy – manna for the (empirical) researchers

Options:

- A profile of institutional criticality
- Grids of criticality

Being critical calls for thinking

- But Heidegger asked ‘What is called thinking?’
- Does the university think?
- Does it think sufficiently to be critical?
 - Is it allowed/ encouraged to think?
- Distinguish critical thinking (within frameworks) from critique (of frameworks)
 - Calls for interdisciplinarity – disciplines becoming entangled with each other.

Realism and criticality

(NB – different forms of philosophical realism – eg Bhaskar, Harman, DeLanda, Bennett)

- Uncovering the real – in the ‘generative mechanisms’ of universities
- Identifying absences
- And absencing absences
- Perceiving the unnoticed
- A call for poets

Ecosystems of the university

- The university is implicated in seven ecosystems, of:
 - Knowledge,
 - Social institutions
 - Persons
 - Culture
 - The economy
 - Learning
 - The natural environment
 - That we have become bewitched by the interconnections with the economy both leads to a neglect of the actual and possible interconnections with those other ecosystems *and* to the university aiding a distortion in the economy as an ecosystem.

Ecological criticality

- ‘Criticality’ here points to the university:
 - ‘Entangling’ itself deliberately across its ecosystems
 - Working in a critical spirit to advance/ strengthen each ecosystem
 - Imaginatively
 - Fearlessly
 - Politically
 - Bringing new frames of understanding into public circulation
 - Widening the pool of linguistic/ cognitive symbols in ‘the commons

Virtues of institutional criticality

- Can we speak of say ‘institutional courage’? (etc Nixon)
- For institutional criticality calls for the eking out of an institutional space in which universities can advance their criticality
- - and so become ‘critical agents’ in society.
- The university can make its own luck, its own critical spaces, to some degree and in some societies.

The university – critical to society

- (earlier distinctions)
- The university qua institution can and should be critical *to* society
 - ie, a vital institution, that aids the vitality of society
- Through its being critical *in* society
- Here, there are matters of rationality, freedom, democracy, open critical dialogue, the existence of a public sphere – the open society
- Danger of thinking that the university needs this environment in order for it to be critical in society
- That is true
- But the university can usually help to make its own luck, to some extent.
- Its being critical in society can help to forge the very conditions that enable it to be so critical.

Conclusions

- We need a new understanding as to what it is for the university to be critical
 - The triple schema of ‘criticality’ – being/action/dispositions
 - can help us, but it needs to be reinterpreted
 - The university is itself fragile and constrained
 - But it has new spaces, new options
 - Its critical task (‘critical action’) lies in aiding the circulation of cognitive material – ideas, findings, concepts, frameworks.
 - But this calls for the dispositions of criticality
 - (critical dispositions)
 - & for ‘critical’ action by the university qua institution
 - We may call this a theory of *university criticality*.



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