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The Coming of the Ecological University

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My talk

- I want to reflect on what it is to be a university
- What are the current dominant ideas?
- What possibilities are there for other, and even counter-ideas?
- What practical possibilities are there?
- If we have a large idea, what are its practical implications?
- My idea – that of the ecological university
- I shall sketch it out
- And indicate what it might look like in practice
- And offer a set of justifications for it.

The state of play

- A falling away
- The passing of the liberal university
- Privatisation; corporatisation (neoliberalism, NPM, surveillance, measurement ...)
- Postmodernism; philosophy of incoherence; no stable place; just alternative 'lines of flight' and 're-territorialisation'
- A double undermining – sociologically and philosophically (and these have run into each other – in a social theory of spaces)
- Q – how now understand the university?
 - Negativities, but more than negativities
 - Unremitting bleakness

Endorsement

Superficial/Endorsement

eg, ideas of quality - ('the world-class university')

Depth/Endorsement

eg 'the entrepreneurial university'

Superficial

A

C

Depth

B

D

Superficial/Critical

eg 'the edgeless university'

Deep/Critical

(feasible utopias
- Projects of hopefulness)
eg, 'the ecological university'

Criticality

The idea of ‘feasible utopias’

- Utopia – out of reach
- Sense of its desirability
- Yet feasible – it could be reached
- The unlikelihood of its being reached reflects the dominance of the structures and interests at work
- So the idea of a utopia is somewhat pessimistic
- And the idea of a ‘feasible utopia’ is a little optimistic – there is a space for realizing a utopia
- Utopias are matters of hope
- Perhaps embryonic instances can be glimpsed.

A critical project of the imagination

- Large role for the imagination
- Concept of ‘the imaginary’
- Taylor – building on traditions, collective sediments
- Sartre – more one of building the future; of willing the future
- A critical project – identified shortcomings in the present
- Believes matters could go better – grounded optimism
- Positive possibilism

Some imaginings of the university

- The authentic university
 - The therapeutic university
 - The liquid university [Bauman]
 - The translucent university
 - The chrestomathic university (Young)
 - The perverse university
 - The university as fool (Kavanagh)
 - The wise university [Maxwell]
 - The virtuous university (Nixon)
 - The theatrical university (Parker)
 - The utopian university
 - The metaphysical university
- *It follows that we need not just more ideas of the university but good ideas. So what is to count as a good idea?*

Tests of adequacy

- Range (theory/ ideas/ practice/ policy)
- Depth (structures/ experience/ ideas)
- Feasibility (power/ organization)
- Ethics (flourishing – human/ organizational/ societal/ global)
- Continuing possibilities/ emergent properties

Severe tests, but they will extend imaginative ideas

- and help to provide a legitimation of the imagination
- supplying potency and efficaciousness to the imagination

The idea of the ecological

- From the Greek ‘oikos’ – house;
- Felix Guattari – *The Three Ecologies*: 3 ‘ecological registers’ : environment; social relations; human subjectivity
- However, I would point to the university being implicated in 7 ecosystems:
 - Knowledge
 - Social institutions (including the political sphere)
 - Physical environment
 - Economy
 - Culture
 - Learning
 - Human subjectivity

Characteristics and implications

- To speak of an ecosystem is to point to a system that has a certain kind of internal coherence but also fragility
- And it is to point to a human embeddedness and a human responsibility in ‘sustaining’ any such ecology
- But sustainability is too limited an idea
- Rather we should speak of *improvement* – of improving any ecology

- To speak of the ecological brings to view the interconnectness of all things
- But this ‘ecosophical perspective’ precisely allows for difference, diversity.

- And challenges

- ‘..everything ... has to be continually reinvented, started again from scratch, otherwise the processes become trapped in a cycle of deathly repetition.’ (p19)
- And so we are led to an ‘ecology of the imaginary!’ – ‘according to different criteria than those of profit and yield’ . (p57)
- - ‘an ecology of resingularization’ (65) – enabling the university to become itself in a new way.
- - ‘a new ecosophy, at one applied and theoretical, ethico-political and aesthetic ...’ (67)

The ecological university

- The ecological university (EU) takes its embeddedness – actual/ potential – seriously
- The EU has a care towards its interconnectedness with the world
- For the EU has a care towards its environment – namely, the world itself
- (All universities are – to some extent – global; they are or would like to be participants in global conversations.)
- So the EU acts in collective interests – ‘that, in the short term, don’ t profit anyone, but in the long term are the conduits of a processual enrichment for the whole of humanity. It is the whole future of fundamental research and artistic production that is in question here.’ (Guattari, p65)
- Universities are all implicated in the global conversations of academe
- They reach out to the world, if only in their aspirations

The coming of the ecological university

- Prompts towards the ecological university:
- ***Global***
 - The ecological challenge – of global warming
 - Global terrorism and crime
 - Energy crises
 - Global diseases and hunger
- ***National***
 - Social disorder
 - Poverty and alienation
 - The other claims us, whether we like it or not
 - We are compelled to take account of ‘strangers’ and offer ‘hospitality’

NB: UK – agenda of ‘public engagement’ opening to universities.

Valuing the ecological university

- Its networks become a site of its value position
- The EU has a care towards the world
- Acknowledges its interconnectedness with the world
 - Both human and physical
- And its possibilities with/ for the world
- Promoting human understanding
- Improving situations in communities
- Widening participation

Possibilities for the EU

- Developing a strategy of ‘public engagement’
- Putting its academic work on-line;
- Holding public lectures – and putting podcasts on-line
- Working with local/ regional communities in addressing social issues
- Working with groups/ communities in the developing world
- Offer pro bono advice
- Producing materials for public consumption
- Its research tackling issues of wide concern
- Its academics becoming public intellectuals – communicating to publics ; enhancing the public sphere
- Teaching: putting each class in contact with a like class in another country and develop a trans-national/ trans-cultural learning space – students as ‘global citizens’
- Promoting inter-connectedness in its staff members (NB U of Durham)
& wellbeing
- A university of wisdom (UCL)

The knowledge ecology

- ‘Aim oriented empiricism’ (Maxwell)
- Epistemologies for understanding – public understanding
- Academics playing public roles
- Advancing the ‘critical conscience of society’
- Epistemological interconnectiveness – transdisciplinarity
- Knowledges in all their variety – experiential/ intuitive/ tacit (not merely 2 ‘modes’)
- Humanities (including languages) accorded proper value
- The imaginative level of knowing enhanced
- Has an ecological ‘knowledge constitutive interest’ – does this knowing promote societal/ global wellbeing?
- Open, transparent and accessible knowledges
- University without walls
- Citizen scientists
- Active in the world
- Academics as ‘writers’

Testing the idea of the ecological U (against the criteria of adequacy)

- **Range (theory/ ideas/ practice/ policy)**
 - *EU has extensive range*
- **Depth (structures/ experience/ ideas)**
 - *EU is sensitive to the deep structures of the world, and to complexity in experience and ideas; it is not a trivial idea. It can live among the antagonisms of the university.*
- **Feasibility (power/ organization)**
 - *EU is open to imaginative practical realisation, even with and even through existing power structures*
- **Ethics (flourishing – human/ organizational/ societal/ global)**
 - *EU has a strong ethical component, being concerned with ‘the other’, individual/ social, local/ global, organic/ inorganic*
- **Continuing possibilities/ emergent properties**
 - *EU can go on being revisited, reimagined, developed. It can unfold in time and space; indeed, it can open new spaces.*

Hope and relevance revisited

- Hope – of better things
- But a grounded hope
- And a sense of relevance resting on the ‘ground state’ of the university
- - as a space of reason in society
- - with considerable potential for establishing its relationship with society and the world anew.

The spirit of the university

- The ecological university has spirit
 - a spirit of human-ness
- It is spirited, a spirited place
- Animated with dispositions of care, of otherness
- An ethos of care, of concern, of hospitableness
- Not yet spiritual, perhaps; but it is inspired
- It is energized not for knowing for its own sake but for the sake of improving the world.

Conclusion

- The university IS beset with powerful forces
- But all is not lost
- Partly we are limited by our imaginations
- If we are to gain regain the university, it will require imaginative effort
- Different feasible utopias can be imagined and brought forth
- ‘The ecological university’ is necessary, and feasible and desirable
- It is just in our reach
- Can we reach for it?



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