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# Understanding the University: Planes, Possibilities, Poetry

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# 'The Philosophy of Higher Education'

- Where & what is it?
- J S Brubacher – 'On the Philosophy of Higher Education' (1977)
- A textbook on key issues – ac freedom, etc
- No successor – but what would it look like?
- Not just a survey of topics but a laying out of a conception of the university
- We need not just a new philosophy of higher education but a philosophy of higher education as such.
- But what could that look like?
- There is a set of difficulties.

# The Great Tradition

- A literature on the idea of the university
- Began with a Germanic idea – the (Kantian) university of reason
- Followed by the English idea – Newman et al (tho NB hid a fierce war) through to Leavis and Oakeshott (et al) – a focus more on the student and his/her development
- Subsequently, Ortega y Gasset, Jaspers, MacIntyre, Minogue ...
- But then:
  - 1 the French critique (Derrida, Lyotard and even Bourdieu) – the postmodern university
  - 2 the coming of ‘the multiversity’ (Kerr) and ‘the entrepreneurial university’ (Clark)
  - Philosophical result:
    - » Readings – ‘the university in ruins’
    - » The debating society idea of the university (MacIntyre, Derrida, Habermas, Readings himself, Nussbaum) – inadequate [to be substantiated] but, in brief, these ideas lack an ontology. (At best, they are ontologically thin.)
- So the idea of the university has run into the conceptual and practical sands.

# An interjection

- Slide from ‘higher education’ to ‘the university’
- Important to keep clear water between the two
- But they overlap
- The concept of university is larger than that of higher education
- And largely incorporates ‘higher education’
- I shall focus on ‘the university’ (not losing sight at all of ‘higher education’)
- [This is a technical distinction, rarely observed in public discourse]

# University as institution and as idea *(with apologies to Schopenhauer)*

- Philosophy needs to understand that the university is a social institution
- It is not just a feature to be acknowledged but incorporated into a philosophy of the university
- Recognition of the university as a real institution
- A realist philosophy
- The university has an independence from our conceptions of it – legal, financial, social, physical
- Held in and working within national and global networks
- (Turnover of some universities – in USA – is now several billion dollars per year)
- So our philosophy of the university has to incorporate a sense of the university as institution and as idea – incorporate an ontological and an ideational aspect.

# Plane 1 – as stated, university as institution and as idea

- These aspects are on a level
- On the same plane
- They interact
- NB Kant-Humboldt, Newman-Dublin, Lindsay-Keele, OU in England
- And developments in the university have prompted ideas of the university
- ‘The Entrepreneurial U’, the digital university, the borderless university
- And interactions both ways – the idea of openness (Michael Peters)

# A commentary on plane 1 – and ontological pessimism

- The ontology of the university has ontological layers
- Bhaskar – the empirical, the actual and the real – producing ‘generative mechanisms’, with causal powers
- More, these are huge global forces
- Neoliberalism, digital age, knowledge economy, globalisation, audit regimes, bureaucracy, ‘cognitive capital’, national and worldwide competition (global rankings)
- Gives rise to (sociological) pessimism.
- Are there any grounds for optimism? Can we glimpse spaces for interjections, spaces of optionality?

## Plane 2: the/a university in its time-space and its possibilities

- Each university is particular
- Has its being in its own time and space
- Its own history, its own contemporary resources
- Its own networks
- Its own ‘equipment’ (Guattari)
- Its own possibilities, including its own possible ‘collective assemblages’ (Guattari)
- Limited but infinite
- Its possibilities are not given
- But need in part to be discerned
- Less ‘lines of flight’ but more ‘lines of becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari; Guattari)
- - movements towards, even if corporate strategies are hopeful fictions.



# Plane 3: Particulars and Universals

- A university is understood through its particulars
- Persons, activities, technologies, events
- In principle, we could assemble a university by listing its particulars
- Of course, this is a nonsense – every action and every interaction is itself a set of infinities (Levinas)
- But it is also a nonsense because we also understand a university – and each university understands itself – through universals
- Large ideas and concepts
- But we also understand a university sector (a higher education system) through universals (cf Taylor – ‘imaginaries’)
- Far from universals dissipating and gaining our ‘incredulity’, these universals are both changing and widening.
- Universals and particulars again interact – hence plane 3.

# An interjection on universals

- To speak of universals is not to claim a universal agreement
- Or to point to essences
- But to spaces for conflict
- ‘Universality is not the neutral container of particular formations, their common measure ... but this battle itself, the struggle leading from one particular formation to another. (Zizek, TPV:30)
- ‘The Universal names the site of a Problem-Deadlock of a burning Question, and the Particulars are the attempted but failed Answers to this Problem’. (36)

# The three planes – an initial commentary and 2 refinements

- The three planes do not meet
- They have different trajectories

## *Two refinements:*

### 1 Their moments interact

- A bewildering criss-crossing of intersections and connectivities
  - Cf globalisation and internationalisation (on different planes, all 3 in fact)

### 2 Ontology and ideation (a kind of ‘epistemology’)

- They present an ontology of the university
- But also equally point to its ideational character – ideas, concepts, imaginings
- Left-hand & right-hand side
- NB: Assemblage theory (DeLanda) is becoming influential. This is an philosophy of society but (a) it is too wedded to the left-hand side; (b) even on the left-hand side, underplays the downward forces.

# The possibility of possibilities

- Not the case that the university is trapped in its ontological settings
- At each level, ideas have a part to play
- NB: Individuals carry with them their own idea of the university – and at all 3 levels
- - and that provides for subversion (eg of performance indicators)
- Yes, considerable forces are at work
- But the very intersection of the ontologies of the university are opening spaces – for ideas and for practices
- ‘For Hegel, external circumstances are not an impediment to realizing inner potentials, but on the contrary the very arena in which the true nature of these inner potentials is to be tested’ .  
(Zizek, TwtN: 142)
- Emergent possibilities – both unwitting and intentional
- Look around the world!
- Not just universities as such but (eg) real efforts by teachers to re-align teaching and research.

# Noticing a remainder

- Adorno's negative dialectics – the negation of a negation can produce a further negation
- We see a further gap between our concepts and practices and situations in the world
- But this gap between concepts and the way matters are in the world are abiding features of the way things are.
- 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder ...' (Adorno, 2014: 5)
- Always a 'remainder'.
- And that offers spaces in which more/ new ideas may come.

# A widening social epistemology

- Back to Lyotard
- To the contrary, universals of the university are widening
- They are widening perniciously – student-as-customer, impact, learning outcomes ...
- But they are also widening in more positive ways – ‘wisdom’, ‘virtuous university’, ‘civic engagement’, ‘public’, ‘ecological university’, ‘wellbeing’, openness, ...
- And others in the wing? - mystery, spiritual university,
- Some of these are reclaimings of earlier ideas (civic, public, open, virtue)
- And so the ideational space of the university is dynamic, antagonistic, spacious.
- It contains ‘spaces’, in that it contains a pliability
  - (And this can be explained ontologically)
- It follows that ‘philosophy should seek its contents in the unlimited diversity of its objects’ (Adorno, 2008:14).

# Imagining the university

- Spaces for imagining the university (differently)
- At the levels of all three planes
- The possibilities of the university (in general [1] or individually [2] or in its particulars [3]) can be/ have to be created; and created in situ.
- There is room for poetry here, for the creative positing of images, metaphors,
- Attending, poet-like, to the interstices of the university (not just ‘the university’ )
- Constructing feasible utopias (university as institution and as idea; and at all three levels).
- The university as a ‘corporate agent’ (List and Pettit)

# Conclusions (?) – or rather considerations

- The philosophy – a philosophy – of the university has to be created
- Practically and conceptually and theoretically
- It does not have to languish in the ‘ruins’ of the university
- Readings was unduly pessimistic
  - A new building can be imagined and created alongside the old (Coventry)
    - But, like a cathedral, it is continuing work in progress
- Not to say that all can be achieved – to the contrary
- But there are spaces not just for resistance but for creative counter-thinking and actions and practices
- This calls for a philosophy of the university that is both ontological and ideational
  - At once conceptual, philosophical, theoretical, empirical, imaginary, poetic and practical.
- The university as idea can help to realign and reorient the university as an institution.
- Not just living in hope but working hopefully and continuously
- This philosophy is a continuing project..



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