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# The Coming of the Ecological Learner

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# My basic orientation

- A sense of the interconnectedness of the university with the wider world in all of its aspects
- An ecological approach
- Also, here, I shall focus on learning and the learner
  - Learning and learners may be considered to as ecosystems interconnected with other ecosystems
    - Economy, knowledge, society, culture, the natural environment.

# The beginnings of the problem

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' (and Derrida's difficulties over the university's 'responsibilities')
- 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
  - The great tradition is over?

**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 student as global citizen'

**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*, the university is implicated in no less than 7 ecosystems:
  - Knowledge
  - Social institutions (including the political sphere)
  - Natural environment
  - Economy
  - Culture
  - Learning (including societal learning)
  - Human subjectivity

(Ideally, I would trace the way which the general idea of the ecological university plays out in relation to each of the 7 ecosystems in turn – but in a single lecture I can only offer some broad-brush suggestions)

# 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 possibly to some kind of impairment
  - eg, its diversity may be constrained (the drawing in of the public sphere)
- 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 strengthening*, *of revivifying* any ecosystem
- To speak of the ecological brings to view the interconnectness of all things
- But this ‘ecosophical perspective’ precisely allows for difference, diversity. (ie, no blue print idea of the university)

## - And challenges

- ‘..everything ... has to be continually reinvented, started again from scratch, otherwise the processes become trapped in a cycle of deathly repetition.’ (Guattari, 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)
- And so, what is to be aimed for here is an ecosophy of the university.

# The limitations of the rhizome metaphor

- Far too static
- Rather, metaphors of the liquid, the fluid
- The university as a 'squid' (NB Zizek's latest book)
- Allows more easily for (D&G's) ideas of territorialisation (& de/ re)
- Or perhaps meteorological metaphors of clouds, haziness, winds, obscurity, and even clarity
- The ecosystems of the university themselves overlap and have invaded the university
- Flow into and across themselves – and into the university
- ie its ecosystems are 'flows of spaces' (Castells)
  
- Deep ecology – but also a fluid ecosophy.

# The ecological university

- The ecological university (EU) is fact and value intertwined
- It 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: This is not to claim that the ecological university only (a) attends to issues in the public domain (b) attempts to ‘solve’ the world’s problems. But this is to intimate that spaces may open for the ecological university.

# Liquid learning

- Learning is liquid
- Across disciplines
- Across domains of experience
- Across work situations
- Through life
- No secure position
- Irresolvable situations – fraught with rival perceptions
- Every day presents a new set of learning challenges

# Students as ecological learners

- NB: many students entering higher education will be alive in C21
- Students as ecological - 2 senses:
  - 1 Passive sense
  - Learning as interwoven in multiple ecosystems
    - - knowledge, society, economy, culture, persons, & natural environment
  - 2 Active sense
  - Oriented to journeying across the ecosystems
  - Exploring, venturing,
  - But then playing a part in advancing each ecosystem.

# The student as a 'global citizen'

- Not just a matter of travel or boundary crossing, across the ecosystems
- But willingly and intentionally so
- A self-sustaining learner
  - A 'global citizen'? Engaging with the cultures of the world
- Having an empathy for the world and its peoples
- Living in multiple environments
- Students – forming collective experiences
- Learning wellbeing – holding the learning spaces together.

# *Being an ecological learner*

- The student has his/her being within a 'space of flows' (Castells)
  - A liquid world (Bauman)
- The student's very being – now encircled and interpenetrated by multiple ecosystems
- Knowledge/ learning/ social institutions/ individual identity/ the economy/ the natural environment/ culture
- Each is dynamic, even impaired
- The learner will have to make her way in this complex world
- Managing the learning self – coping with learning conflicts (formal and informal)

## Being a student – a troublesome matter

- Multiple learning spaces
- eg, the geology student – has to become her/himself
- Plus lifewide learning
- On the edge of incoherence
- A single self-narrative may not be possible
- A continuing and radical fragility
- (suicide; counselling and support systems)

# The student as voyager in time and space

- Virtual/ physical
- The internet – roaming the world in time and space
- Across disciplinary borders
- Moving into new spaces – of the self
- Extraordinary encounters
- Of students from faraway lands
- Of ‘responsibility’ – responding to situations
- Coming to have a care for the world and
  - Contributing to it.

## Conclusion

- The university – encircled and penetrated by multiple ecosystems
- Learning is just one of these ecosystems
- The student – has the challenge of making sense of disparate learning experiences
- She/he becomes an ecological learner, as she/he intuits the presence of multiple learning voyages
- And the challenge of making a narrative out of it
  - Of being a self-sustaining learner
  - And of having a care towards her total learning ecology
  - Which, all the while, embraces the world.
- Just how might the university respond to this new pedagogical environment?

