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Institute of Education
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Thinking about the university and higher education

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Centre for Higher
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A bit of autobiography (self-disclosure!)

- Formative years
- Ernest Gellner
- What is/ was a university? (1960s)
- Philosophy and Sociology
- MPhil thesis – ‘Knowledge and Ideology in Higher Education’
- PhD – ‘The Legitimation of Higher Education’
- Basis of 1st book (1990)
- Career as an administrator til my 40s

'The Idea of Higher Education' (1990)

- The very idea of higher education
- The philosophy of higher education
- Mapping the territory
- Double undermining – epistemology/ socially
- Key issues – culture, rationality, research, academic freedom
- An argument (regaining a liberal higher education)
 - critical thinking
 - critical interdisciplinarity

‘Higher education’ and ‘university’

- My books – each one has focused on one or the other
 - But not both
- ‘Higher education’ and ‘university’ – distinct concepts
 - Though they overlap
- And each raises profound philosophical problems
- What is it to receive a ‘higher education’?
 - A critical concept
- Does a university have agency?
 - What is it to be a university?
 - What are its possibilities; its responsibilities?

The philosophy of higher education and A philosophy of higher education

- The field as such
- And the advancement of
 - A broad conception as to what work in the field should be like
 - A particular conception of higher education
 - Actually, sets of conceptions – university & higher education

The philosophy of higher education

- Realist (return of realism) – sense of both univ and HE as social institutions
 - A social philosophy - so we have to do some sociology
 - And be sensitive to difference
 - And to ideologies
 - And power ('cognitive capitalism')
- Critical (gaps between our concepts and their instantiation - Adorno)
- Positive – searching for possibilities
- Identifying responsibilities
- Imaginative and even utopian
- Practical – search for practical principles

(Some) key themes

- Interconnectedness – entanglement (not just ‘networks’)
- Ideology
- Openness - & freedom (NB 2 concepts of liberty)
- Uncertainty (of/ in the world)
- Disputability
- Care/ concern
- Responsibility
- Knowledge – and understanding
- Utopia - & feasibility
- Possibilities
- Life

Placing my philosophy

Against(!)

- Derrida
- Lyotard

For & against:

- Readings
- Maxwell
- Gellner
- Zizek

For:

- Feyerabend
- Bhaskar
- Harman
- Habermas
- Guattari

The ecological university (1)

- The idea of ecology
- Interconnectedness
- Assemblage
- Impairment
- Human involvement
- Human responsibilities
- So the idea of ecology goes well beyond the natural environment
- eg, Knowledge ecology

The ecological university (2)

- 7 ecosystems (knowledge, learning, persons, institutions, economy, culture, natural environment)
- University is entangled in each ecosystem (varies across universities)
- So:
- What is the ecological footprint of each university?
- What can the university do (each university) to advance each ecosystem?
- NB: not just a matter of 'sustainability'
- A philosophy of higher education with ethical dimensions.

This philosophy of higher education

- Starts not from philosophy or philosophers but from the world
- And attempts to match concepts ('university'/ 'higher education') against that depiction
- And builds new concepts ('supercomplexity', 'critical interdisciplinarity', 'pedagogy of risk', 'the ecological university')
- With a practical intent
- NB: interweaving of epistemology/ ideas with ontology (the way that things are in the world)
- Neither concepts in themselves nor philosophers and their work as such
- Nor a matter simply of 'the crisis in the university'
- But seeking spaces for improvement.

Conclusions

- In understanding higher education, the philosophy of higher education has an important part to play
- Opens doors to well-founded critique
- But also to possibilities
- This calls for imagination
- And for courage
- But also for astuteness – ‘the best in all possible worlds’
- Helping new worlds forward
- But this also requires thought
- And thought is difficult (personally/ institutionally)
- But that is a topic for another day!



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