Realising the Ecological University

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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
Superficial/Endorsement
- eg, ideas of quality - (‘the world-class university’)

Depth/Endorsement
- eg ‘the entrepreneurial university’

Superficial/Critical
- eg ‘the edgeless university’

Deep/Critical
- (feasible utopias - Projects of hopefulness)
  - eg, ‘the ecological university’
An inevitable remainder

• The university is always less than it can be
  – Less than the sum of its parts
• Always short of its possibilities
• The concept – now imagined – opens a gap
• Always a beyond
• A double remainder
• - between ‘reality’ and idea
• - between ‘reality’ and possibilities in the future
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
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

- To speak of the ecological brings to view the interconnectness of all things – a universality

- But this ‘ecosophical perspective’ precisely allows for difference, diversity.

- ‘..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)

- ‘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)
Ecological epistemologies

• ‘Aim oriented empiricism’ (Maxwell)
• Epistemologies for understanding – public understanding
• 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
• Active in the world
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
• - through the idea of the ecological university.
The spirit of the university

- The ideas of spirit/ negations/ and combating negations to fulfil the spirit of the university/ the promise of reason (Hegel)
- 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?