The University as a Critical Institution: an ecological sighting

Ronald Barnett, University College London Institute of Education
Queens College Cambridge, CHER conference, 7 Sept, 2016

www.ioe.ac.uk
The ‘research question’ of this paper

• Can any sense be attached to the notion of ‘the university as a critical institution’?
  • And if so what might that be?

NB:
• This is a conceptual paper – ‘What is it that we take a university to be?’
  And a theoretical paper:
• What are the social conditions of the emergence of the university as a critical institution?
Some preliminary distinctions

- ‘University’/ ‘higher education’
- Being critical in the university/ being critical of the university
- Internal criticality (within the university) and external criticality (in the relationships between the university and the wider world)
- University qua institution/ university qua idea
- The university being critical in society/ being critical to society.
On the basis of those distinctions:

In this paper, I am concerned almost entirely – tho not completely – with:

1 the university (rather than with higher education)
2 its own criticality – not in criticisms turned on the university
3 both its internal criticality and external criticality
4 primarily, the university as an institution (but will also keep an eye on the university as an idea)
5 the university being critical in society – but I hope to show how the university might be critical to society.
Background – some features

- State-university relationships (cf Turkey, China, Japan, South Africa, Chile, UK, USA)
- Massive global deep structures/steering mechanisms
  - ‘Cognitive capitalism’
  - Neoliberalism
  - World rankings
  - Regional superstructures
  - Digital age
- The university moves and has its being in awkward spaces (which have a constraining effect)
An earlier proposal (1997)

• That critical thinking is not enough
• To (1) CT we need to add
  (2) ‘dispositions’ towards critical thinking – critical being
  and
  (3) critical ‘action’ (a will to enact CT)
• Together, these three components amount to (a neologism of mine!) ‘criticality’
• We need to see whether and how far this triple schema has application here, in relation to the university as an institution.
7 forms of institutional criticality

1. Uncovering the deep structures – ‘steering mechanisms’ – of the world
2. Widening public understanding, enhancing critical citizenship
3. Being a space for critical debate
4. Identifying ‘absences’ in the world
5. Academics as public critical intellectuals
6. Exemplifying critical discourse
7. Developing students’ ‘criticality’ (‘higher education’)

An immediate ploy – manna for the (empirical) researchers

Options:

• A profile of institutional criticality

• Grids of criticality
Being critical calls for thinking

- But Heidegger asked ‘What is called thinking?’
- Does the university think?
- Does it think sufficiently to be critical?
  - Is it allowed/ encouraged to think?
- Distinguish critical thinking (within frameworks) from critique (of frameworks)
  - Calls for interdisciplinarity – disciplines becoming entangled with each other.
Realism and criticality

(NB – different forms of philosophical realism – eg Bhaskar, Harman, DeLanda, Bennett)

• Uncovering the real – in the ‘generative mechanisms’ of universities
• Identifying absences
• And absenting absences
• Perceiving the unnoticed
• A call for poets
Ecosystems of the university

- The university is implicated in seven ecosystems, of:
  - Knowledge,
  - Social institutions
  - Persons
  - Culture
  - The economy
  - Learning
  - The natural environment

  That we have become bewitched by the interconnections with the economy both leads to a neglect of the actual and possible interconnections with those other ecosystems and to the university aiding a distortion in the economy as an ecosystem.
Ecological criticality

- ‘Criticality’ here points to the university:
  - ‘Entangling’ itself deliberately across its ecosystems
  - Working in a critical spirit to advance/ strengthen each ecosystem
  - Imaginatively
  - Fearlessly
  - Politically
  - Bringing new frames of understanding into public circulation
  - Widening the pool of linguistic/ cognitive symbols in ‘the commons
Virtues of institutional criticality

• Can we speak of say ‘institutional courage’? (etc Nixon)
• For institutional criticality calls for the eking out of an institutional space in which universities can advance their criticality
• - and so become ‘critical agents’ in society.
• The university can make its own luck, its own critical spaces, to some degree and in some societies.
The university – critical to society

- (earlier distinctions)
- The university qua institution can and should be critical to society
  - ie, a vital institution, that aids the vitality of society
- Through its being critical in society
- Here, there are matters of rationality, freedom, democracy, open critical dialogue, the existence of a public sphere – the open society
- Danger of thinking that the university needs this environment in order for it to be critical in society
- That is true
- But the university can usually help to make its own luck, to some extent.
- Its being critical in society can help to forge the very conditions that enable it to be so critical.
Conclusions

- We need a new understanding as to what it is for the university to be critical
  - The triple schema of ‘criticality’ – being/action/dispositions
    - can help us, but it needs to be reinterpreted
  - The university is itself fragile and constrained
    - But it has new spaces, new options
  - Its critical task (‘critical action’) lies in aiding the circulation of cognitive material – ideas, findings, concepts, frameworks.
  - But this calls for the dispositions of criticality
    - (critical dispositions)
  - & for ‘critical’ action by the university qua institution
- We may call this a theory of university criticality.
Indicative bibliography

Rolfe, G (2013) *The University in Dissent: Scholarship in the Corporate University*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge/SRHE.