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Placing the University: Thinking, Ecology and Utopia

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A context of vision and possibilities

- Title of conference: ‘The *place* and *space* of higher education: past, present and future *visions* of *physical and virtual* realities’
- ‘The *physical* and *conceptual* space [and place] of higher education in the knowledge society’
- The German plays with two words, Traeume (*dreams*) and Raeume (*rooms/ places*)
- Whether HEIs are *giving students enough space about which to think* about important issues such as ethics and values
- Context in which *curricula are being crowded* with subject contents so as to prepare students for their careers
- (and are full of ‘skills’ that students are expected to acquire)
- Possible place of higher education in the future with regard to *utopias*

Exam questions

- 1 What should the university of the future look like?
- 2 Do architect's ideas correspond with the wishes and needs of students and lecturers?
- 3 Where will *students, lecturers and researchers* of the future *gather* together to exchange with one another?

Are these questions sufficient to do justice to the conference themes?

- Just 'students, lecturers and researchers'?
- Architects are important – but ...

My title and thesis

Title: ***Placing the University: Thinking, Ecology and Utopia***

Thesis (6 parts):

- i That the university is *primarily*, or rather should be, a *place of thought*
- ii Such a conception is *in jeopardy*
- iii An *ecological perspective* may help its recovery – the university becomes both a place and a space of thought aimed at promoting *the knowledge ecology*
- iv The university as a set of *buildings* can both *help and hinder* the realisation of this set of ideas
- v These ideas have *global reach*. The university, qua institution, has to become a *citizen of the world* (and preferably of the universe).
- vi So the process by which *universities are 'built'* becomes crucial: the conversation to go beyond the architects - a *space for utopian thinking* about the university.

Heidegger's question

- 'What is called thinking?'
- And his observation that:
 - 'In universities especially, the danger is still very great that we misunderstand what we hear of thinking.' (2004/1976: 15)
 - NB: We now hear very little of thinking (in the university).

The twin – or is it three - perils

- The emergence of
- 1 Cognitive capitalism
- And
- 2 Higher education falling within the neoliberal fold
- But now (3) the emergence of a ‘post-truth’ era and the role of experts is questioned (a situation in which perhaps the U is partly to blame).

Heidegger’s questions are given added urgency and point, not least so far as the university is concerned.

Is thought even utopian?

- The question: is the university as a place of thought a utopia?
- Not just: is there time to think?
- But is there space to think?
 - ie, are we *allowed* to think? (Let alone dream of possibilities.)
- Deleuze and Guattari: ‘Thinking provokes general indifference. It is a dangerous exercise nevertheless.’ (*What is Philosophy?*, 2003:41)
- Not quite right. Thinking *is* dangerous, and so it provokes *hostility*.
- Bhaskar: ‘Humanity is in crisis. [But] how many academics actually talk about [this] crisis?’ (*From Science to Emancipation*, 2002: 65)
- Zizek: ‘Rare are those who dare to dream utopian dreams about possible alternatives.’ (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 2009: 77)

Climbing out of the pit

- Is it possible to climb out of this pit?
- Is there a way forward that the university can *feasibly* take?

Pedagogical spaces: a set of warnings

- The (my) questions and issues suggest that there is no technological fix.
- Indeed, a concern with physical arrangements may be dangerous if that is all there is
- (The new pedagogical spaces)
- Leading to presenteeism, visibility, ventriloquism, false camaraderie, consensus, cognitive comfort
- But thought is
 - Difficult
 - Requires space
 - Communicative conflict
 - Epistemic virtues of courage, persistence, inwardness ...
- 9 • & yes, conversational, but freely entered into (not forced / NB learning analytics).

The idea of ecology

- Fact and value
- Assemblage of cognate entities
- Inherently self-sustaining capacities
- But liable to be impaired
- Partly or wholly as a result of humanity's actions
- So responsibilities fall upon humanity to do what it can to repair situations

Knowledge ecology

- Knowledge circulates in and out of the university across society
- It has all kinds of aspects and manifestations – epistemic entities
- Think tanks, parliamentary committees, companies, professions – all produce their own knowledge and in different formats and media
- This can be considered to be an ecology
- Is it robust? Is it impaired? (Social media, politics, newspapers ..)
- Public understandings of complex and important issues (Brexit, contemporary elections, ecological issues)
- Experts disbelieved; ‘alternative facts’; a ‘post-truth’ era.
- This knowledge ecology is impaired.

The thinking university – and addressing the knowledge ecology

- Now, responsibilities befall the university to help to repair the knowledge ecology
- But this requires thought in the university
- And a willingness to engage with society
- To improve the circulation of ideas and evidence across society
- And to deepen the public understanding of matters
- Much more than ‘public intellectuals’ and reaching out to ‘citizen scientists’ or ‘citizen scholars’.

The university as place and space

- This university has both place and space
- It is likely to flourish partly in virtue of its having a (physical) space – and presence
- But this university also has space
- It is distributed across society, across the world
- It engages with the world
- The world is its oyster
- The university is a gathering, but/ and it gathers across the world

Research

- Research becomes an inquiry into the total wonders of the Earth
- Humanity is not privileged.
- But attention is paid to the effects that humanity is having on the Earth, including on human beings
- More, attention is paid to the ways in which humanity might help to improve the world, having despoiled it.
- And attention has to be paid to humanity's ways of knowing, not least in the ways epistemologies of the West/ the North have been built around a separateness of humanity and the world, and so have favoured instrumental reason.
- Requires transdisciplinarity & open conversation.

Teaching

- Teaching becomes a drawing forth, a beckoning into a strange and disturbing place
- And places the student in the context of the world
- Not merely a global citizen but even a citizen of the universe
- Here, too, there is a gathering
- Not an obligatory extraversion
- But an encouragement to dwell thoughtfully with others
- This education treads on the student's presuppositions, asking awkward questions
- Setting the studies in the widest trans-disciplinary context.

Outreach

- The is where the university of the twenty-first century wins its spurs.
- It plays the game of cognitive capitalism
- But works around it
- To reach out to the world
- To widen and to *disturb* the world's understandings of itself and its possibilities
- The university now comes to create gatherings
- Communities/ collectivities of learning across the world
- (The internet, mass media, social media ...)

The knowledge ecology revisited

- A university of this kind attends to the knowledge ecology severally
- It ranges widely, bringing colleagues together across the disciplines, setting up transdisciplinary encounters
- It widens the range of ideas in circulation
- It is imaginative
- And it widens understandings in the world
- It produces publics
- It helps, therefore, to repair an impoverished knowledge ecology.

Returning to place

- The university is here in this place, and yet is no-where, except in the space of the world, and even of the universe
- Its material environment can uplift it in its purposes, encourage conversations, offers spaces for chance meetings and conviviality
- But beware – of forced conversation, of a ‘learning community’
- This pedagogical meeting can constrain thought
- Produce group think, Heidegger’s ‘the they’
- The challenge on the environmentalists is to summon up a sense of the whole world in intimate spaces
- To open the mind to profound and disturbing/ strange/ critical thought.

Conclusions

- The material spaces of the university are crucial.
 - They can inspire and downcast.
 - recalled in distant memories of one's university
- But their fullest inspirational duty comes in opening doors
 - Vistas of the world
- Pedagogies are more than material
 - They are matters of the promptings of the mind
 - Of deep and disturbing questions (Socrates taught in the open)
 - Of difficult matter to be comprehended (thought is difficult)
- The silent old-fashioned library has much to commend it
 - (and perhaps the fancy atrium disrupts the attention)
- The ecological university is a place of inter-connected deep thought,
 - It has a care for the whole world and puts itself into the world
- It is 'built' out of utopian imaginations. Not just a matter for the architects.
- A utopian university? Perhaps. But it is perhaps, too, a *feasible* utopia.



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