



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

The Coming of the Ecological University

Ronald Barnett

University College London Institute of Education
La Trobe University, Melbourne, 10 July 2018

www.ioe.ac.uk



Centre for Higher
Education Studies

My basic orientation

- Philosophy not as conceptual analysis but as conceptual construction and conceptual imagining
- A realism (NB several varieties these days) – here a sense of the university as having a presence in the world independent of human thought of it. (digital reason, global cognitive capitalism, not to mention its physical and technological materiality.)
- But while bound in to the ‘real world’ not entirely incorporated into it.
- Also, here, I shall focus on ‘the university’ – and so distinguish ‘university’ from ‘higher education’. (Both concepts are important and overlap but they are not reducible to one another. Often they are unhelpfully conflated.)

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?
 - Possibilities/ new spaces/ new imaginings

Endorsement

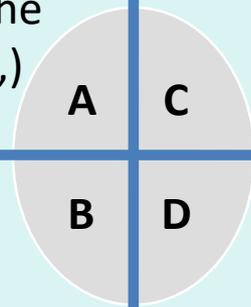
Superficial/Endorsement

eg, ideas of quality - ('the world-class university',)

Depth/Endorsement

eg 'the entrepreneurial university'

Superficial



Depth

Superficial/Critical

eg 'the edgeless university'

Deep/Critical

(feasible utopias
- Projects of hopefulness)
eg, 'the ecological university'

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

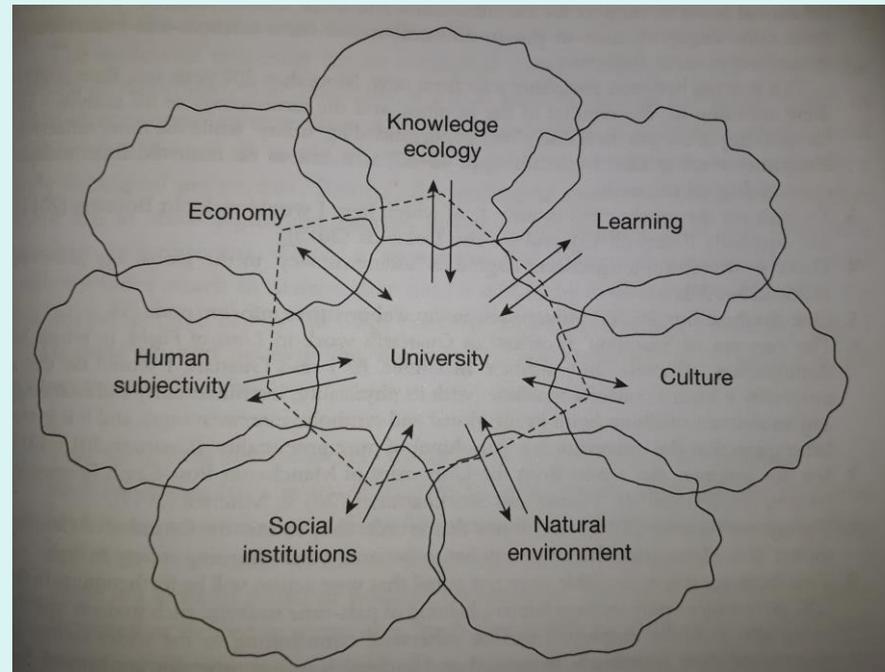
- and help to provide a legitimation of the imagination
- supplying potency and efficaciousness to the imagination

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)

The university – 7 ecosystems



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)

The limitations of the rhizome metaphor

- Far too static
- Rather, metaphors of the liquid, the fluid
- The university as a 'squid'
- Allows more easily for 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 the 7 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 – a ‘thick concept’ (Williams)
- 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

Global

- The ecological challenge – of global warming
- Global terrorism and crime
- Energy crises
- Global diseases and hunger
- Inter-dependency

National

- Social disorder
- Poverty and alienation
- Generational conflict
- 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.

Valuing the ecological university

- Its networks become a site of its value position
- The Ec Univ 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
- Has a concern with human flourishing (not just its students)

The ecological university has a concern towards itself

- The ec univ is also necessarily concerned with itself – the flows across disciplines, the univ as a space for argument, the full flourishing of its students.
- It has a concern towards its own capacities for thinking. (NB Heidegger's critique of the university in '*What is Called Thinking?*')
- And thereby its capacities for aiding the thinking of/ in society – and so widening the public sphere.

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
- Links between North-South universities
- 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)
- Revivifying the humanities.

NB: If it is said that some universities do much of this, then (a) that is a demonstration that the Ec Univ has already come amongst us without us recognizing it and (b) that the entrepreneurial university may be already passé.

The knowledge ecology

- 'Aim oriented empiricism' (Maxwell)
- Epistemologies for understanding – public understanding
- Academics playing public roles
- Advancing the 'critical conscience of society' (NZ)
- 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
- University without walls
- Citizen scientists/ citizen scholars
- Active in the world
- Academics as 'writers'

No blue-print philosophy

- No one way of being an ecological university; no blue-print philosophy
- 'Being' – 'being possible' (Heidegger)
- But the possibilities of what it is to be an ecological university have to be discerned and imagined
- For each university.
- So bringing to bear an imagination that is positive, realist, creative, and critical all at once.
- This is hard work, discerning and imagining possibilities that just might be brought off in the best of all possible worlds – and then attempting to bring off such ideas, throughout a university.

A university for the whole Earth

- The ecological university acts in the interests of the whole world (Guattari)
- But 'the world' comes with its own baggage
- And is too limited in space and time
- Much better, given the sense of seven ecosystems, to speak of the university having a concern for the whole Earth (for this includes the sensuous (Abrahm), the aesthetic, the emotional, and the ethical and the conceptual as well as the more 'real' components

Testing the idea of the ecological U (against 5 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.*

Not mere resistance

- This conception represents an assault on instrumental and performative reason
- Not resistance per se or subversion (Rolf) but sighting a new possibility.
- But also (our starting point) offers a way of energizing an entirely new constructive conception of the university that can plausibly play out.
- Our concepts exceed their representations in the world (Adorno; Marcuse)
- The idea of the ecological university offers a way of expanding the potential of the university in the world and so helping to realize the possibilities in the very concept of university
- But more so, it helps to prompt searchings for new ways of realizing the university in the world.

The spirit of the university

- The ecological university has spirit
 - a spirit of human-ness
- It is spirited, a spirited place, even spiritual
- 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
- And it is just in our reach.



Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL

Tel +44 (0)20 7612 6000
Fax +44 (0)20 7612 6126
Email info@ioe.ac.uk
Web www.ioe.ac.uk