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# Realizing the World-class University: an Ecological Approach

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# Two rival perspectives

- 1 Global positioning and achievement – at state and university levels
  - institutional status; national status ('W/Class universities in a World-class HE system')
  - system connotations
  
- 2 Target of critique – connections with cognitive capitalism, unthinking 'innovation', institutional entrepreneurialism, and global hierarchy.
  - World-Classness – has an undue external orientation;
    - falling away from the internal concerns of universities
      - as spaces of collaborative reason

# Challenge

- Another way?
  - Holding to the term ‘world-class university’
    - But:
      - 1 Retaining something of the internal values and *identity markers* of the university  
(conceptual and social aspects)
      - 2 Does justice to the place of the university in the twenty-first century world  
(realist and imaginary aspects).
- [ie an exercise in social philosophy]

# Fact and value

- ‘World-class university’/ ‘World-class universities’ – fact & value
- In the policy circuits of higher education, a term of praise – a hurrah term
  - (In the social theorists of higher education, one of critique – a boo term)
- For the managers/ planners/ politicians, an implicit ref to rankings
- Top hundred
- Evocative: The phrase is intended to evoke sentiments of approval
- Who could not be in favour of being – or wanting to be – world-class?

# Problems

- 19,000 universities – so top-100 just 0.5%.
- Rankings – qs over their validity and reliability
- – small (contestable) range of Pis, focused on research
- *Moreover:*
- Promotes *undue* competitiveness
  - & (global) inequalities across universities
- Promotes a restricted functioning of the university – knowledge production/  
cognitive capitalism (Boutang)
  - *But not our concern here.*

# An empty signifier?

- Conceptually trivial
- Tho some attempts to fill it out, these are afterthoughts
- Generally used unthinkingly
- However, it signifies power – and of 3 kinds:
- Discursive
- Economic
- Political

# And signals state interest

- The phrase signals an interest on the part of the state
- Many states are seeking either to retain their universities as ‘world-class’ or to secure a group as ‘world-class’
- (And also little understanding as to the nature of what it is to be such a university – conditions of ac freedom, inst autonomy, civic freedom, public speaking out ...)
- *So not an empty signifier* – a place-holder for global knowledge politics *and* global institutional politics.
- Conceptually trivial – but *not trivial*, not to be dismissed.

# Matters of value

- *Accorded:*
  - to certain institutions – most universities are downvalued
  - to the rankings – invested with magical properties as if they are ‘real’
  - to competitiveness as such
- *But also:*
  - to STEM
  - multi-faculty universities
  - global epistemic power.
    - Ie, a dominant ‘value framework’ (Taylor)

# ‘Thick concept’

- ‘Thick concept’ (Williams)
  - – fact and value, discourse and the ‘real’
- Fact and value
- Asserting and implying facts about universities
- Global hierarchies/ epistemic hierarchies
- Legitimises state control ..
- But value framework
- *What is important for universities in a globalised world?*
- <sup>9</sup> • ie go beyond critique

# An ecological situation

- ‘Ecology’ – a metaphor – beyond the natural environment
- In general, an ecology is:
  - A set of entities more or less interconnected
  - Self-sustaining
  - Complex - Emergence
  - Fragile
  - Liable to be impaired
  - (often as a result of human action)
  - Issues of repair, wellbeing and human responsibilities.

# Guattari's three ecologies

- Human subjectivity
- Natural environment
- And social institutions

# Ecologies of the university

- Radicalise Guattari
- 8 ecosystems of the university
  - *Knowledge*
  - *Economy*
  - *Learning*
  - *Persons*
  - *Social institutions*
  - *Political sphere*
  - *Culture*
  - *Natural environment*

# Each university – its one ecological footprint

- Spreads across the eight ecosystems
- Its own ec footprint
- Its own possibilities
- Not given
- Discerned, imagined
- Options
- An ecological totality – its own emergence

# Structure and agency

- University – a ‘corporate agent’ (List and Pettit)
- Agency
- Choice
- Huge uncertainty
- But then responsibilities
- Agency not given – has to be worked at (across the ecosystems) – ‘task and achievement’ (R S Peters)

# Fact and value - again

- Ecological facts
  - fragilities
- Ecological values
  - 'ought' overtones
- And responsibilities
- Universities – have helped to bring about a fragile world
- - and have responsibilities towards the world

# The World-class university – a barren idea

- Barren in context of the entanglement of university – (8) ecosystems
- Has to be reconceived – in that context
- The world-class university – the idea of a university that is in the class-of-the-world
- A concern/care towards the whole world
  - From the world
  - Of the world
  - In the world
  - Across the world – across the 8 ecosystems
  - And for the world

# eg UN's Development Goals

- Agency has to be worked at
- Many univs are situating themselves in context of UN DGs
- But that has to be done seriously - beyond rhetoric
- Juxtaposing – the DGs (each of the 16), a university's resources and its possibilities across the 8 ecoystems
- Hard work – and never fully realised
- Always emergent
- Corp strategy – hopeful fictions & imaginative aspirations.

## - And across a university's ecological situation

- Which ecosystems
- Which programmes of study
- Which research centres
- Which intermeshings of research (which new res centres)
- Which public(s)
  - Requires effort, imaginings, leadership, managerial competence, political nous ...
  - Unyielding complexity (lateral, vertical, temporal).

# A worldly university

- Worldly legitimacy
- Listening to the world – not a generalised ‘Other’
- And giving to the world
- Not really a ‘dialectic’
- But intentional, even if uncertain and unpredictable
- Notices absences & impairments
- Can advance the world – aid its wellbeing

## NB: no hierarchy here

- No limit – everyone of the 19,000 universities could be world-class
- - could be a university in the class that is ‘of-the-world’
- And so no hierarchy
- (Which could open the way to more North-South cooperation - & we are seeing signs of this.)

# Conclusions

- ‘World class university’ – powerful signifier
- & encourages particular ideas and real presences of the university – ie, powerful as signified
- ie, doubly powerful, even though conceptually empty
- But there’s a sense of the term that can rescue the term and help the university and the world to flourish
- A university in the class-of-the-world – and for-the-world
- Fleshed out by situating the univ in its ecological context
- It’s an idea that never lets the university off-the-hook
- Ever changing value and practical challenges
- But perhaps its time is just upon us.



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