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The Philosophy of Higher Education: Concepts, Contours, Challenges

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Starting points

- Populism; climate change; social exclusion; culture wars; tension in state-society relationship
- Belief that the University & HE has a responsibility to respond
- Agreed – BUT cart-before-horse!
- The University is in large part *a cause* of these maladies.
- This is (part of) the setting for the philosophy of higher education.

- I want my cake and eat it
- I want to indicate the range of the whole field (*The phil of HE*)
- And a way of navigating it & of enhancing the dynamic of the field.
- - ie, A philosophy of higher education.

A quick history

- 200 years of writings on the idea of the university – mostly by philosophers (now hardly ever examined) – [Peters and Barnett, Vol 1]
- ‘*The Idea of Higher Education*’ (1990) – a pitch for the philosophy of higher education
- Its ‘bibliography’ was fictitious!
- There had been a few prior efforts, esp by W Roy Niblett (UK) and Brubacher (USA)
- 30 years: the field has taken off such that there are divisions within it and scholars specializing in sub-fields
- But little theorizing/ reflection on the field as a whole.

Just a sub-plot in the field of the philosophy of education? No!

- Early criticisms – no such field; no distinctiveness. Wrong!
- eg:
 - Students are adults
 - Voluntary
 - Learning is ‘spacious’
 - Connection with research
 - Supposedly enjoys ‘academic freedom’
 - Tightly bound into cognitive innovation – ‘cognitive capitalism’ – a cognitive engine
 - Global & international
 - Huge size – some universities are the largest employer in the town
 - Universities have enjoyed philosophic attention (from Kant onwards)
 - A bumpy field, *in motion*; with strange contours; and places both dark and light.

The tasks

- Conceptual clarification – eg ‘epistemic justice’; ‘decolonisation’
- But not just conceptual clarification
- Nor just a demarcation of forms of life
- Seeing concepts not just in ‘context’ – for what is to count as ‘context’?
- The widest possible context
- The philosophy of higher education is social
- But this means concerning ourselves with the nature of higher education in and across the world – peer into the world and HE within it
 - If our conceptual analyses are to hold water.

Pitfall (1): the relationship of 'teaching' to 'research'

- Assumption that T & R are complimentary
- 20,000 universities in the world: only 2% are seriously research oriented
- So a danger of the phil of HE concerning itself with just a few institutions
- Yet R is important – the spirit of inquiry
 - Beware of mantras – 'the world-class university';
 - But also what counts as research is problematic
 - It is an indication of the power/knowledge pairing (Foucault)
 - The concept of R is changing (the term 'research' – recent origin)
 - Now, associations with funding, science, mathematics, replicable experiments/trials/ field studies and big data (R = STEM).
- So 'R' is limited *both* as concept and as practice.
- So how conceptualise the T-R relationship?

2nd pitfall:

Philosophy of higher education assumes a ‘humanities/ social theory’ perspective

- Those who work in the philosophy of higher education are drawn from the humanities and social sciences
- They harbour their own values
- Of persons, humanity, learning, teaching
- Important but inadequate
- [Nothing] to say about science/ STEM – but this is a technological society!
- [Nothing] to say about research – and its capture (‘innovation’/ ‘impact’)
- Where they do, it is to bewail the ‘posthuman’ world
- Talk of ‘transdisciplinarity’ fares little better.

3rd pitfall: an over-focus on ‘higher education’ – and neglect of ‘university’

- Concepts of ‘higher education’ and ‘university’
- Used interchangeably
- But they are distinct concepts with their own histories
- Both are important (& they overlap) but neither is reducible to the other
- Profound qs about the place of the university in the world
- & about what it is to learn in the C21; and to teach.
- T and L can’t be seriously conceptualised without a sense of the U
- The U is the prior concept – but it is often overlooked.
- (Separation of my own books)

The very field of the philosophy of higher education

- The world is in motion & independently of our conceptions of it
- The world and ideas/ imagination
- Further, entities in the world are inter-connected
- Deep structures and forces
- Not level, but exhibit hierarchies (I'll come back to this point)
- Our thoughts can influence the world – and vice versa.
- So we need to understand the world – eg of higher education & univs
- In order to do serious philosophical work (work that might have a purchase on the world)

Philosophy of higher education – and social theory

- Our concepts emerge from a social background
- Not just imaginaries but vehicles saturated by interests and ideologies
- So danger that our philosophy/ies will be ideological
- So need seriously to try to understand the world
- We need multiple frameworks for comprehending the world
- Out of such theorising can come critiques of the world
- Phil of HE – social, and critical.

On critique

- A falling short
- Possibilities
- Potential
- Responsibilities
- Distinguish
 - Of the world
 - Of theories, concepts, views of the world

But to say this is to imply that phil of HE has to be realist

- Sense of the world independently of our thinking of the world
 - Sense of (1) the world and (2) our thinking of the world
 - ‘The world’ – the Earth (the glaciers, the disappearing species?)
 - The Universe – the Earth but a speck in the Universe
 - Ontology and Epistemology – interwoven but distinct
 - But also our reasoning, and our judgements about our reasons
 - Bhaskar’s ‘holy trinity’
 - The Real (hierarchical) power of universities as a force in the world
 - Besieged by even wider forces in the world (‘Cognitive capital’; ‘algorithmic capitalism’; ‘surveillance society’; ‘digital world’) – all is in motion
- ¹² So phil of HE – social, critical, realist, vitalist.

A layered world

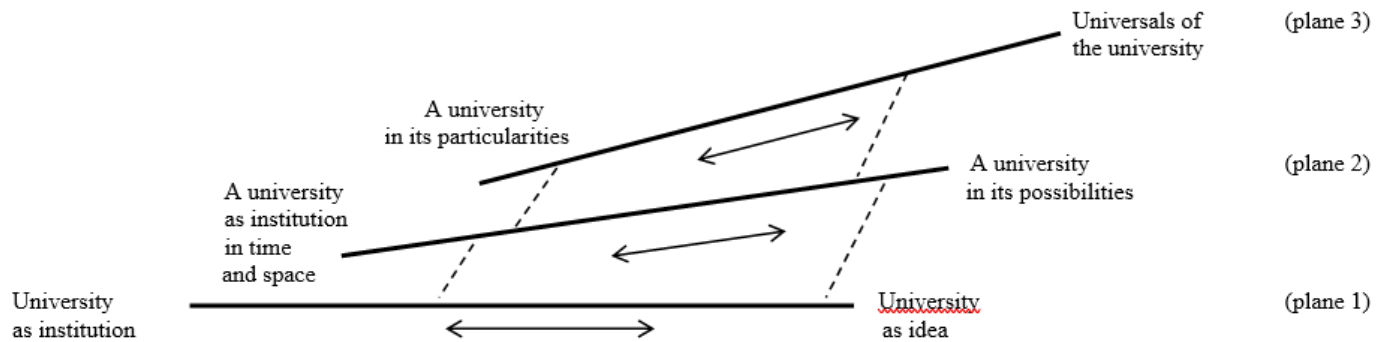
- Some new realists evince ontological egalitarianism
- Everything is inter-connected –yes
- But everything is on a level – no
- There are power struggles not only in human life but in the natural world
- Some entities are more powerful than others
- Forces are hidden
- In the human world, ideologies are hidden
- Terms such as neoliberalism, globalisation, cognitive capitalism indicate our ignorance of the deep structures at play
- Universities stand in a hierarchy; so do disciplines – ‘epistemic injustice’

Implications: example - interdisciplinarity

- It is no longer enough for our curricula to be ‘interdisciplinary’
- If the world is full of interconnected entities, human and natural, organic and inorganic, and always in motion, our epistemologies need also to be open, interconnected, multiple, and allowing for and provoking daring iconoclastic insights.
- Our knowledge can never match the world (Adono)
- eg the whole world of higher education
- ‘interdisciplinarity’ is not enough
- Call for ‘transdisciplinarity’
- Can it match the world?

Three planes of higher education

- The university – and higher education – moves on three planes:
 - 1 University/ HE as institution – U/ HE as idea
 - 2 A U in the present (and its heritage) – a U as it might become
 - 3 Particularities of a U – Universals of a U (and their potential)
- Ontology and Imaginary
- Imaginary as constituted – Imaginary as *constitutable*
- Criss-crossing connections/ disturbances
 - Changes in the Real affect ideas of the University and vice versa
- Instability – provides possibilities



Three planes of the university and their interconnections

Supercomplexity

- Complexity is real – is a systems complexity; and produces stress
- Supercomplexity – essentially a discursive complexity
- ‘What is it to be a university?’ - ‘To be a Professor’?
- The world presents as an intermingling of four moments:
 - Uncertainty
 - Unpredictability
 - Challengeability
 - Contestability
- The Real and the Imaginary jostle and disturb.
- No stable place – no wonder that academics experience mid-career burn-out
- Whereas C could be mitigated, we have to live with S, which grow evermore S!
- ¹⁷ We have only our imaginations – fragile at that

Some key matters – to be worked out within this 3-planar conception

- Teaching – to be reconceptualised – T as provocation
- Learning – also to be ditched: ‘authoritative commitment’
- Critical thinking – to be widened and layered
- Values – to be fundamentally reworked; the possibility of possibilities
- Culture – CCD ...
- ‘Research’ – Not ‘transdisciplinarity’ but an ‘interagonal skirmishing’
- Academic Freedom – to become ‘academic responsiveness’
- Ecology – a HE for the Ecocene but distinguishing ecology & ecosystem

Conclusions

Starting point: The world and our ideas of it

- A world in motion and intermingled
- If the world is like this, so too must be our learning & inquiry
- The univ and HE are in motion (we are seeing that NOW)
- Phil of HE: realist, social, critical, realist, vitalist,
and imaginary
- Head in the clouds – but feel on the ground
- Horizontally & Vertically – social/ natural forces; beware of ideologies;
- Sharp sense of our understandings always falling short
- What is possible? What needs to be done?
- Feasible utopias
- We write to convince others!



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