Imagining Universities: New Worlds, Old Ideas

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I

When as individuals we celebrate our own 50th birthday, it is probably tactful not to enquire too closely into the circumstances of our conception. But where a college is concerned, the case is rather different. Not only are we unlikely to uncover quite such embarrassing details, but it is much less clear what will figure as the equivalents of those key moments of acquaintance, attraction, and arousal. We know from the oft-told story of Clare Hall's founding that the idea of establishing some kind of 'Institute of Advanced Study' was prominent in the founders' thinking and that the exemplary predecessor they had in mind was the celebrated Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. They were, incidentally, not alone in having this thought at that time. In 1964, the year in which the key discussions took place in Clare College, the Franks Commission was hearing evidence on the future of Oxford, and I note from the big multi-volume history of Oxford University that 'several witnesses pressed for the setting up of an institute of "advanced studies" modelled on that of Princeton'.

Once embarked on the genealogy business, one can of course extend the same enquiries to previous generations. The Institute at Princeton had been established in 1930, and its founding Director was Abraham Flexner. Flexner had largely spent his career as an educational administrator with wide experience of universities in Europe as well as the United States. He drew on that experience for his influential book, Universities: American, English,and German, in which he was scathing about the failings of the American university, not altogether complimentary about institutions in Britain, and reserved his warmest praise for the research-led centres of higher learning that were at the heart of the German universities of the late-nineteenth century. Flexner ended his book by calling for that ideal of advanced research to be given proper institutional expression in the United States, a call that was explicitly answered with the founding of the Institute at Princeton and his appointment as its Director. The presence of ghosts from the past can spoil birthday parties, but there is a sense in which we may say that Clare Hall is the great-grandchild of an American administrator's attraction to a severe embodiment of late-nineteenth-century German masculinity.

I have been lucky enough to spend my entire academic career in two institutions that reflected the optimism and imagination of the 1960s, since, before becoming a Fellow of Clare Hall, I taught for 12 years at the then only recently founded the University of Sussex. Sussex, the first of the so-called 'new' or 'plate glass' universities of the 1960s, opened its doors in 1961 with the ambition of breaking the mould of British higher education and drawing up, as the signature phrase had it, 'a new map of learning'. But again, when one enquires into the conception, in every sense of the word, of the new university, one finds older ideals playing their part. The imprint of Oxford was clearly legible from the start - lecturers were initially called Tutors and its contextual courses were intended to replicate some of the spread of the Oxford Greats course. It soon earned the label 'Balliol-by-the-sea' - John Fulton, its first Vice-Chancellor, was a Balliol man as was Patrick Corbett the revealingly named 'Senior Tutor'. But when one probes further, a more intriguing set of sources of inspiration comes into view. I was particularly interested to come across this reminiscence by one participant in the key discussions of the

late 1950s: 'Books about universities from Newman to Moberly and from Flexner and "Bruce Truscot" to Armytage were read and re-read'. This list names, as I shall explain in more detail in a moment, the famous line of works on the 'idea' of the university that stretches back through the first half of the twentieth century to John Henry Newman's Victorian classic. So, looking into the genesis of some of the most innovative new institutions, we find ourselves repeatedly referred back to some very traditional ideas with a long history.

Now, half a century later, the circumstances in which both Sussex and Clare Hall were founded can seem almost unimaginably distant. Those who are confident that the unprecedented pace of change in the present makes past experience largely irrelevant are fond of pointing to what they see as the two great transforming powers of the contemporary world: first, the processes summed up as 'globalisation', and, second, the revolutionary power of new technology. And these changes, it is claimed, render earlier conceptions of the university outmoded.   If universities are re-imagined as the direct expression of the age of global capital, then, it is argued, there is no reason for them to be funded by a particular state. They simply become one means for players in a market to seek advantage, and those players can come from anywhere. Therefore the relation should be that of customer to provider, not of citizen to state. And the new technology reinforces this: there is no need to be physically in one place rather than another. The only connection between a student and a university that is essential is the ability to click on a credit-card account. Indeed, even the language of 'promoting national economic needs' is, fundamentally, at odds with this truly global picture, as the masters of global capital realise all too well. HSBC is not concerned with Britain's 'national needs' any more than is the 'British' hedge fund which, for tax purposes, has its offices in a Swiss canton. As far as such commercial enterprises are concerned, 'countries' simply figure as sets of trading conditions: one has a 'more flexible labour market' (that is, flexible about sacking people), another has a 'supportive fiscal regime' (that is, supportive of making and retaining large profits). Similarly, if it proves a better return on investment to get your training in Singapore, to start building future networks at MIT, to pick up a useful dollop of cultural capital at Oxford, and so on, then those are the decisions global consumers will make - all the relevant goods can be priced into the market. Those who want to see British universities largely funded by the British state, and perhaps even imagine them largely filled with British students, can be portrayed as survivals from the era of the nation-state, or even as the educational equivalent of UKIP.

Techno-futurologists go further still and ask whether, if everything that has previously been done face to face can now be done online, location matters at all. If a university is a brand, why should it not sell in all available markets? If a library is in effect just a website and a lecture is in effect just an internet clip, and if an exam is a machine-graded multiple answer quiz, why not just enroll everybody who applies, wherever they are? What were once brand-name doctrines only obtainable from a particular source have now become over-the-counter commodities obtainable anywhere. Or, garbling another cultural referent, the study of almost any discipline has now become a jeu sans frontières: couched in a sophisticated dialect of 'Globish', universally available introductory packages constitute the 'canon' of the internet age, just as online reviews turn literary criticism into a variant of TripAdvisor. The metaphor of 'inside the walls' has long survived the functional demise of such architectural structures themselves; now the only relevant kind of wall is a pay-wall.

But the serious question lurking under my deliberate rhetorical exaggeration of this case is: where might we turn for help in trying to think about the future of universities in this so-called globalised age? It is notoriously difficult not to feel that what is familiar somehow represents the essential or eternal truth of any practice or institution. But the very existence of this college, whose 50th anniversary we are now celebrating, should be a reminder of how what was unthinkable yesterday becomes unremarkable today. The essential definition of a college seemed to many in the early 1960s to be what they thought it had always been - composed of undergraduates, single sex, chiefly devoted to the humanities, and with a small number of fellows all involved in teaching its undergraduates. It took imagination to see that changing some of those features did not mean destroying the very idea of a college. But what about thinking on a larger scale about whole universities and indeed university systems? Where can we look for some inspiration in trying to identify what is in some way essential to such institutions, part of their definition, and what by contrast is merely local or contingent and hence changeable?

Don't panic - this lecture is not going to be another of those pious invocations of the eternal truths laid down by John Henry Newman over 150 years ago. But it is true that in our larger reflections on this topic we are inevitably led back to that long tradition of books that attempts to reflect on what is usually termed 'the idea of the university'. I'll say something more about some of the main twentieth-century examples of that genre in a moment, but the question I want to focus on this evening is this: what is the function of the literature on the 'idea of the university'? Are all such statements bound to be backward-looking and parochial? Are they not all, we might ask, born out of a particular experience, reflecting the circumstances of a particular tradition and locality, and therefore doomed to be outdated and irrelevant as soon as they are published (and even my casual use of the term 'published' may suggest assumptions from a world that is passing away as we speak)? Or do we keep going back to them because they somehow help us to think about a very different future? As a way of beginning to address these questions, let me ask you to consider the following.

II

In the past century and a half, there have been numerous books and essays addressing, in different guises, 'the idea of the university', and a recurrent pattern is discernible across these otherwise widely-varying publications. The main premise of this pattern is that the university ought ideally to be understood as the home of economic and utilitarian purposes, but that it is currently under threat from measures that embody the contrary values of learning and cultivation. Instead of a pragmatic commitment to training students for jobs and applying technology in ways that directly benefit the economy, both government policies and wider opinion are more and more forcing universities to become centres of open-ended enquiry, transmitting a belief in the value of the life of the mind. Thus, this literature takes the form, implicitly if not explicitly, of a call to arms: what has been precious about universities - that is, their service role in the economy - is uniquely imperilled in the present generation, and so it falls to those who understand and care about the true purpose of these institutions, politicians and business leaders above all, to rally round before it is too late. The proper vocational, applied, and technocratic identity of the university has already been badly eroded, but now it is on the point of being overwhelmed completely by the engulfing tide of pure scholarship and classical Bildung.

Well, you get the joke, but before we move beyond the slight cognitive dissonance stirred by this way of putting it, we might ask ourselves not simply why the pattern has actually been the exact reverse of that which I've just playfully described, but why my fanciful account should seem self-evidently absurd. After all, if what we might, as shorthand, call the 'ideal' and the 'instrumental' have been the two main rival understandings of universities over at least the past couple of centuries, we would expect that each would have its champions and each would have its periods of flourishing or even dominance as well as its periods of being recessive or on the defensive. But, to judge by the various statements of 'the idea of the university', it hasn't been like this at all. The idea being articulated in this literature is always in some sense on the defensive, while the contrary utilitarian conception is always depicted as being in the ascendant. And that is partly so because the latter is treated as being not just supported by, but expressive of, the constitutive logic of modern societies - what one of the contributors to this literature representatively described in somewhat reductive terms as 'the blind drive onward of material and mechanical development'. At bottom, the literature on 'the idea of the university' is defined by the felt need to articulate, to re-articulate, the way in which universities, by their very nature, obey a different logic.

Once we become aware of just how repetitive this pattern has been, several questions propose themselves. First, why is it that all the celebrated statements seem to be on just one side of this divide? Has no deathless prose been written about the aims of servicing the economy or training the workforce, and is that because the forces of social and economic change are seen as their own vindication, not in need of any such rhetorical assistance? Or is the very idea of an instrumental or utilitarian position in fact just a straw man, the self-serving creation of those who wish to represent themselves as upholding some higher or nobler ideal? Closer inspection suggests that the measures which each generation of champions of the 'idea of the university' complain about are usually introduced by statements from politicians or administrators that at least pay lip-service to a diluted version of the day before yesterday's 'idea of the university' literature. So the asymmetry is deceptively deep: not only is all the imperishable prose on the 'ideal' side of the conflict, but its authors have written many of their opponents' best lines for them as well.

Then there is the question of just why this pattern is so repetitive. Not only does one 'side' never seem to win a decisive and enduring victory, but similar terms of debate and similar argumentative moves recur in each generation. If new circumstances have given rise to a particular staging of this clash, why are the arguments so manifestly not new? If the case was powerfully and unforgettably stated by a writer in the past, what need to attempt to re-state it now, and so on? These reflections suggest that there may be some advantage in shifting our focus from the content to the medium, considering 'idea of the university' writing as a literary genre in its own right.

It is not difficult to state the hostile case against this literature. When some time ago I told a friend I was reading works on 'the idea of the university', he wrinkled his nose and declared that surely it was an inherently arid and pointless form of writing. More generally, it tends to be damned for its lack of realism, its preference for mellifluous generalities over useful practical suggestions, and its frequently conservative or nostalgic character. Such writing tends to be stimulated by the threat or actuality of new measures made necessary by social change, to which its response, it is alleged, is to invoke some

idealized notion of how universities used to be in the very different social circumstances of the past. Since such writing is often produced by people in universities unhappy at the direction of change, especially where such change represents expansion in both numbers and range of subjects as part of the adaptation to a more modern and democratic society, surely the truth is, say its critics, that literature on 'the idea of the university' is just a polysyllabic way of keening for the privileges of yesterday's elite.

Apart from its other failings, this hostile characterization fails to address one obvious fact about this literature, namely its durability. The institutional arrangements being presupposed by such writing may long since have disappeared, the measures being protested against may have long been forgotten (or simply accepted), but the piece of writing itself lives on, re-read and sometimes re-edited in subsequent generations. The most conspicuous example of this is, of course, Newman's Idea of a University which, as I have argued elsewhere, was, even when it was published in the mid-nineteenth century, presuming certain features that had already passed away with early-nineteenth-century Oxford. And yet, the book itself remained the most frequently invoked work across the debates of the twentieth century and their entirely different realities of higher education. Although Newman's book is in a class of its own in these respects, it is nonetheless true that several other contributions to this literature enjoyed when they were published, and in some cases have continued to enjoy, a prominence that may now seem puzzling given their datedness and their lack of any directly useful proposals.

Let me at this point mention a few examples of this genre, confining the selection to works published in English in the twentieth century. A classic starting-point, in this case American, might be Thorstein Veblen's The Higher Learning in America, published in 1918, followed by Abraham Flexner's Universities: American, English, German that I mentioned earlier, published in 1930. In Britain the 1940s saw several notable examples, including Bruce Truscot's Redbrick University and F.R. Leavis's Education and the University, both of 1943, followed by Walter Moberly's The Crisis in the University in 1949. As we move to more recent times, there is an abundance of candidates, though their durability is not yet attested, but here I will just mention Jaroslav Pelikan, The Idea of a University: a Re-examination (1992), Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (1996), Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson, The New Idea of a University (2001), and Gordon Graham, Universities: the Recovery of an Idea (2002). Two related genres that I shall ignore here, though much might be said about them, are, first, the subset of writings on the nature of the humanities, including relatively well-known examples such as R.S. Crane's The Idea of the Humanities (1935) and the 1963 collection edited by J.H. Plumb on Crisis in the Humanities, as well as more recent examples such as Martha Nussbaum's Not For Profit and Helen Small's The Value of the Humanities; and, second, those official reports that aspired to state some enduring truths and exercised considerable influence, such as the 1945 Harvard report on 'general education' or in Britain the 'Robbins Report' of 1963. Such publications clearly belong to different genres or sub-genres, even though their thinking was sometimes closely bound up with that of the 'idea of the university' tradition.

III

Let me spend a few moments on just one example from this tradition. It may seem surprising to say that if you want some insight into the brave new world into which British universities are now moving, you should turn to a book first published in another country a century ago, but Veblen's The Higher Learning in America remains a brilliant indictment of misapplied commercialism. As a brief illustration,

we have only to consider his description of the way the dominant business ethos believes it must be possible to reduce all learning to 'standard units of time and volume, and so control and enforce it by a system of accountancy and surveillance; the methods of control, accountancy, and coercion that so come to be worked out have all that convincing appearance of tangible efficiency that belongs to any mechanically defined and statistically accountable routine'. Ah yes, 'that convincing appearance of tangible efficiency': how on earth would we fill our days if we did not have to keep up that appearance? Those not familiar with the nature of scholarly work believe it can be measured and quantified in the same way as commercial and financial activities, and universities, cowed by the dominant business ethos, fall over themselves to comply. Similarly recognizable is Veblen's withering specification of what is required to fill the role of the American college President: 'As to the requirements of scholarly or scientific competency, a plausible speaker with a large gift of assurance, a business-like "educator"..., some urbane pillar of society, some astute veteran of the scientific demi-monde will meet all reasonable requirements.' Ah yes, 'some astute veteran of the scientific demi-monde' - the exact type of so many Pro-Vice-Chancellors and quango chiefs. In Clare Hall, I might add as an aside, how fortunate we are not to have a President of this type. Examining the public statements of such worthies, Veblen concludes that their overriding aim is not to offend: 'Hence the peculiarly, not to say exuberantly, inane character of this brand of oratory, coupled with an indefatigable optimism and good nature.' Ah yes, few things in the contemporary university make the flesh crawl more than the kind of unctuous corporate uplift which is clearly intended to placate the powers of the non-academic world.

Part of what gives Veblen's critique its perennial vitality is the sharpness of his perception of the clash between fashionable economic models and the true nature of untrammelled enquiry. He may at first seem high-handed when he writes 'No scholar or scientist can become an employee in respect of his scholarly or scientific work', but actually he is pointing to an enduring tension inherent in the role of the salaried searcher after truth. He acutely identifies how the market model leads to an over-emphasis on making a university 'competitive', with everything devoted to acquiring prestige, expanding numbers, keeping up positive appearances. This concern with the management of appearances results in 'statistical display, spectacular stage properties, vainglorious make-believe, and obsequious concessions to worldly wisdom'. It is hard to think of a better phrase to characterise the tone of many official statements on behalf of universities than 'obsequious concessions to worldly wisdom'. Veblen is unwavering in his conviction that scholarly and scientific enquiry is the true heart of the university; other functions have accumulated around that, but they tend, as he said of professional schools, 'to create more of a bias hostile to scholarly and scientific work in the academic body'. Even much of undergraduate education is in this sense a secondary or derivative function: a college that operates just as a glorified high school is not, in his view, a university.

Veblen's baroque sarcasms are clearly a vehicle for the classic tropes of cultural criticism: misconceived machinery threatens to throttle the true nature of open-ended enquiry; an alien language colonises the minds of those who should be the defenders of such enquiry; and - particularly striking, but perhaps not uncharacteristic of this literature - is Veblen's confidence that popular sentiment supports the true idea of the university rather than the fashionable commercial distortions of that idea: he speaks of 'this massive hedge of slow but indefeasible popular sentiment that stands in the way of making the seats of learning over into something definitively foreign to the purpose which they are popularly believed to serve'. It is not just that, like any cultural critic, Veblen writes as though, however powerful may be the

forces of darkness, his implied readers will be able to recognise the truth of his message; it is also that he believes there are deep-seated intuitions among the wider public that still uphold the true idea of the nature of universities. Perhaps some version of this hope still haunts much writing about universities even today, and perhaps it is not wholly misplaced.

From the several more recent contributions to this genre, let me briefly focus on Bill Readings' widely-cited 1996 book, The University in Ruins. Readings' book might most economically be characterised as an attempt to re-think the modern university through the categories of late twentieth-century literary theory. In Readings' view, the modern university was initially theorised by Kant, Humboldt and the early nineteenth-century German Idealists, and it is based on the union of Reason and Culture, or in educational terms of Wissenschaft and Bildung. But the main interest of Reading's book lies, I think, in its central trope: that of the modern university as now 'an institution in ruins'. It has, he contends, lost whatever informing 'idea' it may once have possessed, and he has some telling pages on how the empty category of 'excellence' now expresses this situation. The university is an administered set of activities united by no more than the fact they derive from an earlier more restricted set of activities that were carried on in institutions of this name, though there is now no agreement on what the range of these activities should be nor whether they have a determinate content.

And it is an institution without any transparent social function that intelligibly links these activities to the presumed needs of society. Here, he seems to me to concentrate too much on the humanities and to neglect the way that a vast array of applied scientific and social scientific enterprises flourish within the modern university without lacking any intelligibility or rationale. But he is surely right about the situation of the humanities, especially perhaps in the elective system that is almost universal in the American 'liberal arts' model, where, he alleges, they function as a supplement to the tourist industry, with partly interested, partly bored, trippers traipsing round the sites to which our predecessor cultures attached value.

It is much harder to say what Readings recommends we should now do. We should, it seems, inhabit the ruins with some sense of postmodern irony while also pragmatically using them to explore the limits of what can be thought. We should see what we still call 'the university' as a site or occasion for the practice of dissensus, a dissensus not redeemed by any belief in an ultimate agreement, not even the agreement to differ. As with all states of methodological self-consciousness, one of the problems with this re-description in terms of literary theory's systematic collapsing of every category is that it makes it hard to see how we decide to do anything in particular. Taken to its limit, Readings' argument would seem to suggest that the whole university will become a kind of continuous seminar mixing philosophy and cultural studies, endlessly questioning the status of any proposed object of study. Readings certainly wishes to resist the pure consumerism of student choice, but he does not seem to provide any rationale for any one object of study rather than another, so the risk is that sheer consumer choice will, by default, end up dictating the pattern of what he calls the 'post-historical university'.

Nonetheless, for all its 1990s high-theoretical invocation of Derrida, Lyotard et al, this is recognisably a contribution to the literature on 'the idea of the university'. It is, for instance, about the university in

general, not about any actual university or any one type of university or even about just one country (his constant reference to the USA is partly offset by his own location as an Englishman teaching in a French-speaking university in Montreal, and anyway, as I have already indicated, he does not neglect European intellectual and institutional history). Even though he disclaims any nostalgia for what he calls 'the university of Culture', his perspective is that of the cultural critic alerting his public to the fact that something has gone badly wrong. And his idea of the university still does seem to rest on our old friend open-ended enquiry, albeit given a post-structuralist twist. Like so much of the 'idea' literature, Readings's book is more compelling as critique than as a blueprint.

IV

Although I am for the moment treating these various writings as a single genre, it hardly needs saying that each example was intimately bound up with a set of particular historical circumstances, and one thing we could do - a task that falls particularly to intellectual historians - is attempt to unravel the specificities of each text by re-connecting it to the practices and ideas it was engaging with. It might be interesting, for example, see how far the actual history of universities in any period corresponded with the pictures painted in these texts; contemporary practice in those institutions may already have been far removed from the ideal being re-stated. 'Idea' writing is always suggesting that something is wrong with current practice or at least with what threatens to become current practice - hence the occasion for writing - and so it might also be revealing to see how far those fears were realized and whether the resulting pattern turned out to be as fatal to the life of universities as was prophesied, and if not why not. I shall not pursue these questions here, but I shall instead focus first on the recurrent rhetorical structure of these debates.

One way to address the issue of repetition is to note that all these classic works claim to be merely re-stating some familiar truths. 'Idea' literature has above all involved re-interpreting, in the idiom of the time, the ideal of free enquiry which has been at the heart of the conception of the modern university since at least the end of the eighteenth century. This is a regulative ideal, one its proponents are prone to feel is constantly neglected or over-ridden in practice; hence the need for it to be correctively re-stated so often. At the same time, from the perspective of the proponents of 'social needs', there is an equally constant opposite process of 'academic drift', whereby the practical purposes of universities are being neglected by the internal imperatives of academic professionalism (or self-interest), and so they must constantly be recalled to their social purpose. Thus, where 'idea' literature is constantly seeking to crystallize what is entailed by the logic of open-ended enquiry, 'needs of society' statements are constantly attempting to rein in the consequences of an excessive attachment to that ideal as it has allegedly shaped actual academic practices.

Clearly, 'idea' literature has been one, indirect, way of articulating a conception of society which registers some dissonance or lack of fit between its determining economic practices and the life of the mind. Seeing how powerfully and effectively the imperatives of the commercial world remake society in their own image generates an unease or, if you like, a surplus, a sense of the 'more' to human life - more than getting a job or making money - that we cannot shake ourselves free from yet also cannot easily integrate into our everyday arrangements. Museums and libraries or theatres and galleries are among the other types of institution that generate this sense, but they are more specialized and not primarily

involved in education, whereas universities can seem to embrace both more unspecialized or unlimited aspiration and more practical and measurable social goals. Universities are in this way doomed to be homes both to instrumentality on a large scale and to the critique of that instrumentality, in a tension or conflict that cannot be wholly resolved. Hence, in part, the repetitiveness of the literature.

And this thought may also bear on the asymmetry I pointed to: the tradition of literature on the 'idea of the university' cannot be genuinely paralleled by a comparable body of writing that asserts the priority of the instrumental needs society constantly wants universities to meet. These claims tend to be made, instead, in ways that are more practical, more patchy, and more embedded in one kind or other of official document. Where the 'idea of the university' literature, mostly taking the form of the stylish book or at least sequence of extended critical essays, has usually been written by intellectual figures who stand in some intimate relation to universities, the 'needs of society' case brings together statements by politicians, journalists, officials, and businessmen, statements which may take the form of White Papers, reports of commissions or committees of enquiry, leading articles, public lectures, letters to the press, and so on.

But if they do not have a common form, these latter statements certainly have a small number of recurrent themes. They typically tend to convict universities of being too introverted, too sluggish, too prone to the vices of scholasticism, too unresponsive to the needs of the economy, and so on - what we might designate as 'the ivory tower indictment', except that that may seem to confer legitimacy on that tired and empty cliché. From the campaign against the alleged failings of Oxford by the Edinburgh Review in the early nineteenth century up to whatever is the latest reiteration of essentially the same case by the representative of business organizations in the present, the spokespersons for the needs of society rail against the self-perpetuating character of academic life, its unjustifiable privileges, and its divorce from something called 'reality', about which these spokespersons are, apparently, experts by definition.

One might mischievously suggest that these pronouncers are, contrary to their intentions, testifying to the uncontrollable dynamic of intellectual enquiry, because they see that this is what constantly drags universities away from the more immediate instrumental aims that have only recently been laid down. They also see that the kind of autonomy that academics claim as the essential pre-condition of fruitful intellectual work is constantly open to abuse. The conditions of work that favour genuine originality of thought also appear to favour shirking and loafing. Rather as with periodic battles over welfare policy, one side sees the systemic benefits of adequate provision, the other concentrates on such a system's vulnerability to exploitation by the lazy and unscrupulous.

We may not wish to go quite as far as the Liberal Cabinet minister, Lord Haldane, writing in 1912, who declared resoundingly that 'it is in universities that ... the soul of a people mirrors itself', but however hard-headed we try to be, we cannot altogether discount the fact that universities always seem to be endowed with what I've called 'a surplus of meaningfulness'. This does not appear to happen with technical colleges, institutes of manufacturing, or cookery schools. Apprenticeship schemes have not thrown up their Newman; institutes of chartered accountants have not been lambasted by their Veblens

for falling away from the high ideals they should embody. The very antiquity, or at least apparent antiquity, of the model of the university may partly be in play here, while as a category universities clearly still benefit from a wider cultural prestige. It is, after all, a striking historical fact that whereas several other types of institution have, over the decades, converted themselves into, or at least re-branded themselves as, universities, there is no such flow in the other direction. This cannot simply be because of an increasingly vestigial association with the elites of earlier periods. Just as some of the aporias of the literature on intellectuals can be seen as a kind of back-handed acknowledgement that the category involves or conjures up something desirable - something about the place we would, in some moods at least, like to see intellect and reflection playing in public life - so, similarly, at least some of the contradictory attitudes that cluster around the idea of the university signal that, even now, the institution is seen as providing the setting, in some cases the unique or necessary setting, for the realization of cherished cultural values.

The recurrent rhetorical patterns discernible in the literature on 'the idea of the university' can also be exhibited by considering what literary theorists would call the 'implied addressee' of such writing. For example, both Veblen and Flexner are sweepingly critical of higher education in the United States and see its failings as having deep roots in the dominant commercial character of American society. But if that character is so dominant, then it is not immediately clear where readers sympathetic to their critical messages might be found. Yet it is a recurrent feature of such writing, as of the larger category of cultural criticism more generally, that the appeal to self-evidence is one of its central argumentative moves. The structure of their prose assumes that merely to describe some of the commercialised activities of contemporary American universities is sufficient for their readers to join in dismissing them out of hand. If all cultural criticism has what might be called (in a technical sense) a 'utopian' element, a horizon of hope, then it has to assume that this will be in some way recognisable to its readers. If there were no such ideal that could be appealed to, however implicitly, then there would be no vantage-point from which current practices could be condemned.

V

Let me conclude. One unsurprising truth we may learn from considering the long literature on the idea of the university is that each generation fails to envision not just the path of future change but also how universities may adapt to this change without ceasing to be recognisable as universities. Some changes may indeed signal the end of the world as we know it, as the doomsayers predict, but a world that we don't know and cannot foresee which arises in its stead may still turn out to be a tolerably good place. The rise of industrialism did not mean that only subjects directly related to industrial production came to be studied in universities. The same may now be true of the financialization of the world. The rise of Credit Default Swaps does not signal the inevitable end of the study of English Literature any more than the rise of the Bessemer Convertor announced the demise of Classics. On the other hand, Classics occupies a vastly smaller place in the university now than 150 years ago and there are intelligible social reasons for this change. It would be foolish to think that social and economic developments now under way may not bring correspondingly significant changes to universities of the future, so let me, in conclusion, briefly turn to the question of whether the long tradition of reflecting on the nature of the university helps us to resist the more apocalyptic current predictions.

The exaggeration built into such doom-mongering tends to undermine its case, and notoriously the record of correctly anticipating and estimating the worth of such changes as have been forecast in the past is not good. But one prediction I would make is that in fifty or a hundred years' time there will be fresh examples of 'idea of the university' literature. The drive by capital and its markets to mould human existence to its will is hardly going to lessen, and so neither will the flickering and uncertain recognition that universities are one major expression of a still-valuable ideal of the open-ended search after fuller understanding that is not wholly governed by that economic logic. Such writing constantly reminds us of the slippage between what is humanly valuable and what is merely unnoticed or accepted or fashionable. The ceaseless rhythm of the waves of everyday life causes a deposit of insensibility to build up that clogs our perceptions and dulls our responsiveness. Procedures established for a series of transient and ad hoc reasons acquire that patina of inevitability with which economic logic needs to coat its operations if we are not to rebel against its unconscionable exactions. Alien language first invades our territory; then it settles and reproduces; and finally, in a familiar imperialist twist, it colonises our minds and leads us to treat its barbarous, exploitative categories as a true description of our necessary state. The literature on the 'idea of the university' constitutes a series of attempts to chip off some of the lime-scale that corrodes the pipes of our thinking, allowing us to see the inappropriateness or even absurdity of terms and procedures that we were otherwise in danger of treating as our own.

So yes, this literature is repetitive, but in the way that the application of any solvent has to be repeated if it is to be at all effective in combatting an unrelenting pressure. Yes, this literature is idealistic, but in the sense in which anything that calls us back to reflection about what makes life worth living can seem idealistic: its function is not to propose detailed alternative procedures, but to jolt us into recognising how far our present procedures now are from serving the true ends of universities. Yes, this literature can seem nostalgic at times because it is protesting against the forms taken by the most recent build-up of ideological sediment, and so it is bound to seem to be hankering after a time when these forms were as yet unknown, though that does not actually entail mourning for a lost paradise, as earlier critiques of the abuses of that time made plain. And yes, it must always mix re-statement of general principle with detailed criticism of recent idiocies, partly because it is the accumulated build-up of such misguided practices and distorting language which has stirred the critic to this re-statement in the first place, but partly also because the process of persuasion requires the recognition of particulars. And, finally, yes, examples of this literature continue to be read and re-read long after the conditions they addressed have become historical curiosities because the energy released by the collision between, on the one hand, the immovable mass of decayed half-truths and rotting clichés and, on the other, the irresistible force of genuine ethical insight functions like a prose version of the Large Hadron Collider. Sentences in which the pulse of thought has been accelerated by insight and indignation can simply shatter an inert list of bullet-points, revealing their basic structure to be no more than a random collocation of managerial anti-matter.

We do not have to admire everything about the great cultural critics of the past, or even agree with any of their particular views, to feel that the force of their writing remains generative of fertile thought for us now in our very different circumstances. If we stop writing and reading (and re-reading) the literature on 'the idea of the university', it will mean that we have suppressed, or perhaps just lost, the ability to identify the ways in which our current arrangements traduce and betray our understanding of what is distinctive - certainly what has been and, arguably, should be distinctive - about the university,

that odd institutional-conceptual amalgam that we have inherited from the contingencies of history and which we re-invent in each generation. In re-iterating that idea, we are not just banging our heads against a brick wall. We are enabling ourselves to see that the supposed wall is just a piece of stage drapery, yet another of ideology's insidious trompe l'oeil effects.

It is because universities are so intimately bound up with the place which the extension of understanding has in human life, individually and collectively, that we cannot simply bracket off fundamental questions about worth and purpose in the way it is sensible to do with a variety of more limited and more purely instrumental enterprises, no matter how essential these may be to the maintenance and reproduction of existence. Questioning whether our present arrangements do genuinely serve that purpose of extending and deepening human understanding is not 'elitist' or 'conservative' or 'unrealistic' or any of the other dismissive labels that busy important people find to hand in the corporately-maintained cliché-pool that passes for the conventional wisdom. Such reflexive questioning is an ineliminable part of the functions that universities serve. So, if you feel something is not quite right when you are told by your line-manager that robust and transparent procedures are necessary if our deliverables are to be quantified in a way that makes us competitive in the global market, then you are already taking the first step in a process of reflection that eventually culminates in reading, or perhaps even writing, a book about the true purposes of universities. Of course, you may feel that there is nothing at all wrong with the sentence I have just ventriloquized, but in that case I suspect you need an altogether different kind of professional help.

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