Is the Global-Virtual University the Future of Higher Education?

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ABSTRACT

In light of the crisis of the national-liberal model of the university we are being told, by a great many interested parties, that the future of higher education now lies with the global-virtual university. In this article we argue that we have to be sceptical about the hype now surrounding the idea of the virtual university and be wary of the combination of neo-liberal ideology and technological mythology that is at the heart of this vision for the future of higher education. This article offers a reflection on just what kind of global or transnational academic order the virtual university promises to bring into existence, given that we cannot make the assumption that a globalized academic culture will automatically translate into a cosmopolitan academic culture. The paper argues that we should remind ourselves, rather, that the globalization of knowledge could take quite different forms and directions, with both repressive and emancipatory possibilities.

If the university is somehow 'in crisis', as many contemporary critics would have us believe, then this crisis is primarily a crisis of the national-liberal model of the university. As Bill Readings (1996: 15) puts it, the modern university has been 'the institution charged with watching over the spiritual life of the rational state, reconciling ethnic tradition and statist rationality. The University, in other words, is identified as the institution that will give reason to the common life of the people, while preserving their traditions.' What Readings maintains, along with other commentators, is that this national frame

of reference no longer 'works' as it once did – the university is no longer called upon to perform this act of reconciliation. The processes of globalization are increasingly challenging both the centrality and the coherence of the national imaginary. And what we are presently experiencing are the consequences of globalization in the sphere of higher education, too. As Gerard Delanty (1998: 15) observes, 'knowledge is increasingly being globalised – detached from its traditional reliance on the nation-state and its custodians, the intellectuals and university professors'. And what we are being told, by a great many interested parties, is that the future of higher education now lies with the future of the global-virtual university.

One reaction to the perceived crisis of the academy has been to defend the liberal model and ideal of the university in the face of what is perceived as the corporate and/or technocratic takeover of higher education. Another – we should probably say *the* other – response has been to embrace the promise and potential of the new global-corporate-technological university, celebrating the new developments in terms of rationalization and real modernization in higher education. And so we have the terms of the contemporary 'debate' on higher education: a debate between those who continue to advocate the principles of liberal education and those who claim to stand for progress and the future. It is, we think, a false debate. What it constructs is an unproductive divide between those who take the position of conservatives and pessimists, on the one hand, and those others who regard themselves as progressivists and optimists, on the other. We suggest that it is a debate between what are, in fact, two equally problematical and undesirable alternatives. And a debate, moreover, that fails to put before us the real issues, as well as some of the real options that we may now have.

Given the nature of the changes that have been occurring in recent years, both in society generally and in higher education particularly, there can surely be no question of sustaining the liberal-national model of the university in the longer term. And we would say that this is no bad thing. Indeed, we might use the present moment to reflect on what has been problematical in the historical nationalization of culture and knowledge. In the university context, why would we want to hang on to national institutions, traditions and ideals at a time when counter-national, or even post-national, possibilities seem to be on offer? Is this not a time when we might try to re-energize the cosmopolitan values that are also part of our intellectual legacy? So let us, by all means, look to the future. But let us do so with a sober and critical spirit. Which is to say that we have to be sceptical about the hype now surrounding the idea of the virtual university. We must be careful about the combination of neo-liberal ideology and technological mythology that is at the heart of this vision for the

future of higher education (Robins and Webster, 1999). If the virtual university now seems to be promising to take us beyond the national-liberal era of higher education, then we need to reflect on just what kind of global or transnational academic order it promises to bring into existence. We cannot make the assumption that a globalized academic culture will automatically translate into a cosmopolitan academic culture. We should remind ourselves, rather, that the globalization of knowledge could take quite different forms and directions, with both repressive and emancipatory possibilities.

In some form or other, it seems to us, globalization is what the future will be about. But what we have to recognize is the contested nature of the globalization agenda (Mongin, 1996). The version of globalization to which we are most exposed is what we might call the corporate ideology of globalization (the version that is systematically elaborated in the pages of *Harvard Business Review*, for example). This is principally an economic agenda, concerned above all with the creation of global business organizations, networks and markets. We may also say that it is, at the same time, very much a *Western* economic agenda. As David Slater (1995: 367) says, these 'influential and well-diffused visions of the global' in fact 'conceal a limiting, enclosed and particularly centred position that is characterised by historical and geopolitical amnesia'. Globalization in this version may be seen as representing an extension and 'modernization' of the imperial project. Slater (p. 368) suggests that the key questions, with respect to contemporary 'global imaginations', are 'Whose globe? Whose imagination?' These important questions look to other ways of thinking about globalization, and suggest that there can be other perspectives on, and possibilities in, global change. Alternative perspectives on globalization (to be found in the pages of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, for example) are less deterministic, and put greater emphasis on new, and often oppositional, cultural and political dynamics. Here the concern is much more with 'globalization from below', with the new cultural configurations that have been created through global migrations and flows, and with the new possibilities that may consequently exist for a more cosmopolitan world order. If the first version of globalization is about adaptation and accommodation to the expansionist logic of global capital accumulation, this latter version stands for challenging the logic of the market, and for creating a more accommodating – and cosmopolitan – cultural-political order from out of the mobilities and encounters associated with global change.

It is in this context – with respect to the corporate versus cosmopolitan possibilities of global change – that we should consider the future of higher education. Prevailing strategies for a future higher education system –

strategies centred on the virtual-university paradigm – generally reflect the corporate globalization agenda. The expectation is that universities will reinvent themselves on the model of the transnational or global corporation. Universities have consequently tended to adopt a more managerial and market-orientated approach to (what has become) the business of higher education. The 'traditional' ideals of liberal education have been replaced by a new discourse of rationality, efficiency, flexibility, competitiveness and so on. The keyword is now 'excellence', where, as Bill Readings (1996: 117) argues, 'excellence brackets the question of value in favour of measurement, [and] replaces questions of accountability or responsibility with accounting solutions'. Universities have to adopt a new managerial ethos because they are now involved in a new competitive game, both amongst themselves and with new kinds of 'for-profit' educational enterprises. The virtual-university agenda points to the significance of new distance-learning technologies for promoting intense competition in a global-scale knowledge and learning market. One informed observer presents us with the following scenario:

> Internet-mediated distance learning will bring a new and potentially explosive kind of competitive pressure to bear on traditional higher education. Through distance-learning (DL), the traditional institutions will compete with each other in a manner in which many previous size and geographic limitations will disappear . . . Access to DL courses is no longer restricted to a location, as are traditional university classes, or to a time, as are traditional classes or televised DL courses. Instead, it becomes global and asynchronous to provide maximum flexibility and opportunity for the student. (Armstrong, 2001: 491)

We should, of course, be cautious about how much this corresponds to the reality of higher education now. But the key point, it seems to us, is that it is this kind of rhetoric that is now motivating change in higher education across the world.

What the new corporate, or corporate-style, rhetoric of the virtual university claims to be putting on offer is some kind of global knowledge and information utopia. As one advocate enthusiastically puts it, in his conception of the 'academy in a wired world':

> For individuals and institutions, globally, one now sees that the movement of information is essentially unbounded . . . And knowledge, which was once captured in the cloistered halls and libraries of academia, in a wired world, is instantly made available. Similarly students who once travelled great distances to listen to lectures of scholars, can now access this knowledge via the world of the internet. (Abeles, 1998: 606)

What we need to recognize, however, is what has to happen to knowledge for this scenario of ubiquitous and instantaneous availability of information to be conceivable – attending lectures of scholars involved something quite different from 'accessing' knowledge through the Internet. The information which becomes globally available is possible only in consequence of its abstraction and standardization. 'Where economies and governments function on a global scale', argues Theodore Porter (1994: 228–9), 'local knowledge deriving from face-to-face interactions will almost inevitably be inadequate. Knowledge detached from the skills and close acquaintanceships that flourish in local sites, becomes information.' A world of information is, then, a world of knowledge detached from local contexts, 'a world of standardised objects and neutralised subjects' (Porter, 1994: 221).

What appears to be crucial in the global information domain is performative or instrumental knowledge. Readings (1996) refers to it as 'dereferentialised' knowledge. For Delanty (1998: 5), what is at issue is the 'end of knowledge', whereby knowledge is 'no longer a transcendent narrative but has entered the production process'; and what we are now seeing is 'the end of the concept of knowledge associated with the Enlightenment and which harks back to Plato' (see also Delanty, 2001). In the 'academy of the wired world', we may say that knowledge is no longer autonomous, nor is it any longer associated with the project of human emancipation.

The question, then, is whether it is possible to resist this corporate agenda for the globalization of higher education. Whether it possible to reinvent the university now on the basis of an alternative, more cosmopolitan, strategy for higher education. This would involve a struggle over the nature and significance of knowledge in these global times. It would mean contesting the would-be hegemony of instrumental and performative knowledge. Rather than thinking in terms of a progressivist narrative of transition from liberal to instrumental knowledge – or, as Gibbons et al. (1994) express it, from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge – we might consider the modern era in terms of an accumulation of different knowledges. Ronald Barnett (1997: 3) rightly points to 'the multiplication of our ways of knowing in the modern world', and argues that contemporary societies are in fact characterized by the possession of 'multiple knowledges'. What we have to acknowledge, then, is the diversity of knowledges that have now become available to us – knowledges from different parts of the world, based on different experiences, different perspectives and different values.

It is useful here to distinguish two models of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, there is the cosmopolitan vision that comes from the corporate logic of

globalization (globalization 'from above'). This is about the possession of the skills and character traits that make a person mobile in the global corporate space – the skills and character traits of Reich's 'symbolic analysts'. This version of cosmopolitan is about being able to fit in to the global enterprise culture at any of its (metropolitan) locations around the world – about the possession of dereferentialized and abstract skill (travelling skills). We might call it the American Express model of cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, and in opposition to the corporate vision, we can identify another version of cosmopolitanism – a cosmopolitanism, or let us say a cosmopolitan potential, that derives from globalization 'from below'. This form of cosmopolitanism derives from new global forms of the migrations of peoples, ideas and institutions. It is a more complex vision, and raises more difficult, but also more significant and interesting, questions. It is concerned with how people might live together with differences – how peoples who have different histories and cultures might construct new kinds of relationships with each other. It is a cosmopolitanism that is concerned with the new forms of encounter that globalization brings about.

We would argue that it is this latter form of cosmopolitanism that is now crucial for re-thinking the role of the university. It seems to us that universities now have the possibility of reinventing themselves as places of encounter for cultures and knowledges from across the world. In this context, we are highly sympathetic to Fred Halliday's plea for an expansion of 'area studies', and to his argument that 'provision for, and insistence on, foreign language competence is more important than all the hype about information technology' (Halliday, 1999: 108). There may seem to be little apparent 'profit' in urging further study of Estonia or Uzbekistan, or of recommending a place inside the university for Urdu or Arabic, but we would argue that there are good reasons for this kind of cultural investment. As Immanuel Wallerstein's Gulbenkian Commission team (1996: 89) puts it, foreign-language competence is more than a matter of translation, because 'knowledge of languages opens the mind of the scholar to other ways of organising knowledge'. But it is not just a question of distant area studies. We would also note that this expression of cosmopolitan values would also involve universities in reaching out to the diverse and multicultural communities that now exist in their localities. In connecting with its immediate neighbours – in engaging with its local area – the university could also engage with issues (and possibilities) of encounter – of knowledges, cultures, histories, ways of life. Our point is that there is now a pressing need to engage with the complexities of a globalized world (surely 11 September brought home this truth?). As their national moorings are loosened, should not universities be reinstituting themselves on a global-cosmopolitan basis?

As well as making accommodation for cognitive complexity and diversity, universities might also be resisting the growing abstraction and instrumentalization of knowledge. In his book, *On the Internet,* Hubert Dreyfus has developed a critique of the abstract model of knowledge and communication that is privileged in the virtual university agenda. His immediate critique is directed towards new virtual technologies that 'diminish one's involvement in the physical and social world' (Dreyfus, 2001: 102). But his fundamental objection is to an underpinning epistemology that is predicated on the ideal of a disembodied and disembedded subject of knowledge – Dreyfus regards it as the technological fulfilment of the Platonic/Christian epistemological model. And what he proposes is an alternative epistemology, predicated on an alternative relation to the world. The crucial question to be posed in the context of contemporary technological developments, he says, 'is whether our relation to the world is that of a disembodied detached subject or an involved embodied agent' (p.54). In his view, it must be the latter – what must be maintained is 'a sense of being in direct touch with reality'. Dreyfus is defending an alternative (pragmatist) model of knowledge, involving an engaged sense of relation to both the physical and the social world.

This epistemological defence seems to us to have resonance in the context of contemporary debates on the future of higher education. For if the virtual university deals in decontextualized or dereferentialized knowledge, might we not suggest that an alternative agenda should provide a space for embedded and situated knowledge? The cosmopolitan university would be one that addressed the decline of the national context of knowledge and culture, and was capable of reflecting on the emergence of new global and local frames (Taylor, 1996). It would be an institution committed to understanding the new global realities, and at the same time grounded in, and producing awareness out of, its own local space. That is, it would aspire to produce a 'contingent universalism' (Wallerstein, 1996: 59) which takes seriously 'a plurality of world views without losing the sense that there exists the possibility of knowing and realising sets of values that may in fact be common, or become common, to all humanity' (p. 87).

What will be the global nature of the university? This question should provoke a debate that extends beyond educational and technological specialists to the wider public. In the context of global change, it has now become an issue of the most profound significance and urgency.

Note

These arguments are expanded upon in the authors' recent book, *The Virtual University?: Knowledge, Markets, and Management*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

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