Re-Envisioning the University: Questions and Presuppositions

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The question that I want to pursue in this paper concerns the idea of university, what it ought to be and what it can be; and I do so from within a certain reflective mode issuing from the following thought of the philosopher Wittgenstein: "The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (1968: 50e). It is certainly neither reproach nor irony that I am attempting to communicate here though. Rather, the effort is directed at gaining a measure of the considerations that we could be bringing to a reformulation of the university idea particularly in the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. It is important, I think, to distinguish between a principle that is coextensive with the whole field of academic knowledge (the principle, say, of university autonomy and public accountability, as indeed academic freedom) and its privileged place of presentation, namely, the university institution. Allow me therefore a sequential elaboration, and further thematic discussion of the ground here being pursued, namely, the university institution as such (or more emphatically, the very idea of university).

I. BEYOND THE UTILITARIAN/NON-UTILITARIAN DYAD

In a commentary entitled "The Concept of a University", which appeared some years ago in the *Philosophy* journal, D. W. Hamlyn (1996) proposed that one of the central aims of the university institution (and one of its enduring achievements at least since they were first set up in the Middle Ages) rested in what he called its enlargement of knowledge: "If learning is to be pursued and if knowledge is to be enlarged there have to be institutions like universities, which have the double role of pushing back the frontiers of knowledge and of enabling future generations to carry on that process" (1996: 216). Surely, in our day and times, this has come under some pressure,

but that is not quite the point that I want to press here. Far from addressing the historical efficacy and applicability of this conception, allow me to stay with the terms of the assessment being suggested.

Hamlyn's commentary is directed above all at advancing the thesis that the university can - and ought to - have a genuine affinity for, and important links with, the enlargement of knowledge. But having said so, he is also concerned to point out that indeed "while institutions of which this is true may be seen as universities and may be given the *rights* which follow from that [awarding degrees, for instance, setting its own standards of assessment, the right to some form of self-government, including over financial arrangements, and academic freedom] and while they fulfil various other *functions* [such as providing economic benefits for society and preparing individuals for future employment] they are in a real sense not what a university ought to be" (1996: 217). Clearly, Hamlyn is inserting a hard idea (or ideal) of university, and yet reiterates that it is possible to accept this idea/ideal without accepting the details of its embodiment. In other words; while no elucidation of the concept of a university can answer all questions on that score, it is "desirable to set out, on the presumption that the enlargement of knowledge is a good, what sort of institutions can make that possible over time, and thereby establish what a university as an ideal must be" (ibid.).

To be sure, one might be charitably disposed to interpret the thesis here being advanced as a gloss on the contemporary drift of universities. But the thrust of Hamlyn's argument is, I think, evident: that "universities are not simply educational institutions" (1996: 218). Interestingly though, Hamlyn is pressing for more, and in what follows I shall quote him at some length before homing in our theme gaining a measure of the considerations that we could be bringing to a reformulation of the university idea particularly in the

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circumstances in which we find ourselves today:

On the other hand, it also seems clear that a university should offer to students a decent range of subjects to study, and that this may affect the furtherance of knowledge as well. An institution concerned with one subject, say theology, would not make a respectable university, since it does not offer a broad enough perspective on knowledge, although it might make an admirable part of a university. But institutions like Imperial College, London, or the London School of Economics – single faculty institutions – would make excellent universities, if it was decided to make them such. Moreover, such purely technological institutions ought to be barred from university status only if the technology involves no background of theory. We should remember that the medieval universities were, in one sense, extremely utilitarian in conception, and often in a specialized way. The 19th century revolt against this was sometimes, but not always, anti-utilitarian, even if insistent on the place in higher education of liberal arts and sciences. Our present concerns with university education have a different background. The fact remains that whatever branches of knowledge a university concentrates on, and for whatever reason, the overriding consideration ought to be the furtherance of knowledge both now and in the future (ibid.).

On a benign interpretation of the formulation anchoring Hamlyn, the long passage that we have just cited offers a wholesome conception of the university institution. It is not necessary for a university institution to be a non-utilitarian one, although historically both utilitarian and non-utilitarian considerations have overseen the growth of universities. In fact, for Hamlyn himself, it is one of the functions of universities to extend the frontiers of knowledge, but this "has to be squared with the aim of providing a higher education for those coming from schools or, in many cases, from other points of origin in later life" (1996: 206). According to him, this "compromise" has very often been an uneasy one "and has often not even existed" (ibid. : 207), albeit being a modern innovation wrought upon the structure of medieval universities, and it is crucial to a university that "some compromise on this point should be arrived at" (ibid. : 206).

Significantly, such concerns as voiced by Hamlyn and others (Michael Oakeshott [1990], or even John Henry Newman [1873/1982] for instance) are far from being a fanciful hypothesis about education or learning generally; they embody specific claims about the exemplary status of the university institution: the university as a place in which the various conversations go on, and which imparts the manners of the conversations (education really as 'cultivation'). [1] It would be easy, of course, to indulge in such concerns by insisting on the ideal of academic freedom and intellectual integrity; nor is the question essentially whether university education should or should not be utilitarian (in fact, I am inclined to affirm

that while universities may or may not be utilitarian, it is not intrinsic to their being so that they have to be *either* utilitarian *or* non-utilitarian). The point necessarily is about opening up all claims about exemplary status of the university institution and engaging simultaneously with the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form.

Readings (1996) is concerned precisely to take on this imperative, forcing home the point that the university today has lost its idea, but an idea that was never strictly or exclusively the property of the university in the first place. According to him, what distinguishes higher education in the contemporary period is that what was formerly regarded as the University of Reason, and then as the University of Culture, has today been supplanted by the University of Excellence; and, what is more, that this supplantation is bound up with the transformation of the role of the nation-state in building the social compact. This is of course an extremely schematic, even reductive, account of a work rich on facts and frameworks. Readings models are derived mostly from Britain, the United States and France, with these settings emblematizing the shift from the cultural mission of universities to the question of "excellence" (the paradigmatic term governing the process of redefinition to which universities in the West, and one might add, India too, have been subjected). The notion of excellence, as Readings renders it, involves a change with respect to the previous values of reason and culture and marks the abandonment of any attempt to determine institutions of higher education in terms peculiar to that institution. The presumption here, clearly, is that the development of universities has occurred in tandem with that of the nation-state – the culture that universities reproduced was the national culture constructed along with the institutions of the modern state – but since the nation-state is on the decline in an increasingly transnational global economy, this development has implications for universities. From this vantage point, the conclusion is that the current fierce debate on the status of the university misses the point, failing as it does to think the university in a transnational framework. Of course, everything depends on just how that transnational framework is construed - and I do not intend to get into it here – but we must ask: is this not also the argument of those who insist that spending for the university (as for so many other social services) must be reduced in the years to come, asserting that any opposition to such cuts fails precisely to think the university in a transnational framework of the global economy, which can only be negotiated successfully by a country that lives within its means?[2]

In perspective is the nature of the relationship between the university and the future. Indeed, from the perspective of the changes affecting the university institution as such, the question would have to be not only whether the university has a future, but also what sort of university the future has or holds in store. On this question, there are those – like Weber (1999), but also Derrida (2001) – who would orient the future campus not in terms of disciplines but consciously breaking disciplinary boundaries, the supposition here being that the greater the specialization of knowledge, the more advanced the level of research, the longer and more venerable the scholarly tradition, the easier it is to ignore discordant facts. The contention is that specialization and disciplinary isolation pose a danger for those new disciplines such as cultural studies or social policy (or new fields like film studies, diaspora, dalit studies) which have been either affirmed or established precisely to remedy the situation. Disciplinary boundaries allow renewed understandings to belong to someone else's story. Given that a scholar cannot be an expert in everything, this must seem reasonable enough. But it is that extra valuation that is given to interdisciplinary (or cross-disciplinary) talk – namely, that if certain constellations of facts are able to enter scholarly consciousness deeply enough, they threaten not only the venerable narratives, but also the entrenched academic disciplines that (re)produce them – which must be queried. This is a topic that can or ought to concern the idea of university, and in what follows I shall be elaborating on this by placing in perspective what I had termed earlier on as the question of the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form.

II. INSTITUTIONAL RESTRUCTURING AND THE DEMANDS OF KNOWLEDGE

When one looks at public higher education as it has evolved over the past 100 – 150 years, one notices an important affinity between the organizational form of the modern university and the work of the various disciplines. This is important because it is crucial to an account of what determines learning processes within institutional forms (and, in consequence, to an account of the formation of disciplines). But it is not so obvious, and, what is more, not many are willing to recognize this. For instance, the historian and sociologist Wallerstein has argued the world of knowledge is being transformed from "a centrifugal model to a centripetal model" (2000: 31) – a development which for him has been a concomitant of two movements, the growth within the

natural sciences (and mathematics) of what is called the 'sciences of complexity' and within the humanities (philosophy, literary studies) of what has come to be called cultural studies'. As he formulates it:

From circa 1850 to circa 1970, the world university system had separate faculties of the natural sciences and of humanities pulling epistemologically in opposite directions, with the social sciences located in-between and being pulled apart by these two strong forces. Today, we have scientists of complexity using language more consonant with the discourse of social science (the arrow of time) and advocates of cultural studies doing the same (social-rootedness of values and aesthetic judgments). Both these groups are growing in strength. The model is becoming centripetal in the sense that the two extremes (science and humanities) are moving in the direction of the in-between centre (social science), and to some degree on the centre's terms (ibid.).

Indeed, if one sees it thus, one will acquiesce in complicating the admittedly eccentric terminology of 'two cultures' – the methodological 'divorce' between science and philosophy/humanities translating into a division, internal to the social sciences, between 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' camps or schools - and hope, as Wallerstein does, that in the ensuing confusion and endless variation "social scientists can help to clarify the issues and thereby promote a new synthesis which would reunite the epistemological bases of the new structures of knowledge" (Wallerstein ibid. : 32). [3]

Presumably because these thoughts have been used for formulating several important theses concerning the social sciences, the institutional restructuring suggested to reflect the new centripetal situation of knowledge have accordingly ranged widely. Thus, responding to the idea of multidisciplinarity and the challenge of institutional restructuring suggested in Wallerstein et al. (1996), the senior Indian sociologist T. N. Madan has noted that the institutional restructuring recommended by Wallerstein et al. – such as "expansion of institutions, within or allied to the universities, which would bring together scholars [from different disciplines to] work in common around specified urgent themes"; "establishment of integrated research programs within university structures that cut across traditional lines"; "joint appointment of professors"; and "joint work for graduate students" (Wallerstein et al. 1996: 103-05) – have been attempted in India "whether deliberate[ly] or fortuitous[ly]"; and gives the examples of the Delhi School of Economics, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (Kolkata). He stresses the importance of evaluating the successes and failures of these experiments, but notes that "the more significant questions in this regard are intellectual rather than

administrative" (2001: IV). One cannot agree more, although the challenge is to determine more precise *intellectual* protocols for evaluating these institutional restructurings.[4]

The problem, of course, is not limited to social science, but involves other disciplines as well. Accordingly, the lamentations of university teachers and science administrators about falling standards of science teaching and research, as indeed the paucity of students aspiring for research careers in the pure sciences and mathematics.[5] They complain bitterly about the eccentricity of the ways of academia, of how disciplinary categories have constrained the ways of knowledge, asking how the boundaries that define disciplines are "today organizationally very strong at the very same time that they have lost most of their historic intellectual justification" (Wallerstein 2000: 33). On the face of it, these are mere cavils at institutional functioning, but they are also directed at the disciplinary edifice of the university institution as such; and therein obtain a host of questions.

Without doubt, the work of disciplines – as indeed broad zones of intellectual concern that we designate as either 'social science' or 'humanities' and even 'science' – are of interest less as the site where strains of given practices of knowledge have sought to query their foundations, than as the theatre in which the structure of knowledge about a certain domain and its relation to the institutional contexts configuring it can be staged as questions. Note, one is not implying that the current arrangements of disciplinarity do not leave a lot to be desired; and yet, however much we are justified in wanting to abandon current forms of intellectual corsetry, my own feeling is that this is a project on which we must embark with extreme care. In fact, in a lecture titled 'The Idea of the University: Learning Processes' delivered in 1986, Habermas expressed his fears that the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form could no longer be grounded in a vision of the scientific process itself. Where hitherto the scientific and scholarly disciplines had represented a medium for both professional preparation and training in the scientific mode of thought, the sheer multiplicity of disciplines and the concomitant differentiation of the specific fields had made it impossible for "the totalizing power of either an all-encompassing philosophical fundamental science or even a reflective form of material critique of science and scholarship that would emerge from the disciplines themselves" (Habermas 1989: 123). Habermas referred to the fact that, while it may be valuable to address the idea of the university and what remains of that idea, "the corporative self-understanding of the university would be in trouble if it were anchored in something like a normative ideal, for ideas come and go" (ibid.). He was explicitly thinking of the exemplary status often accorded to the university institution - the university as more than just educational institutions, but also embodying institutionally and anchoring motivationally an ideal form of life – but what seemed to worry him even more was the role that such an idea could play in the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form. He warned that, as ever, the university which was gaining in functional specificity within specialized fields of knowledge would have to discard what was once called its idea, indeed the basis of its claim to exemplary status.

Habermas was by no means in favour of a radical reformism, though. He recognized that even as the university form of organized scientific and scholarly learning through disciplines would not require a normative model – recall that the German sense of *'Wissenschaft'*, meaning any organized branch of knowledge and including the humanities and social sciences as well as the physical or natural sciences, incorporates "such rich connotations that there is no simple equivalent for it in English and French" (Habermas 1989: 109) – a certain corporative consciousness in the self-interpretations of the purveyors of university knowledge would be expected. This is indeed a critical reminder of the idea of university, of the learning processes organized in university form, which often the pervasive questioning of the disciplinary edifice of the university institution as such loses a focus on. At this point, we must ask: does the important innovation that universities represent lie in the kinds of things that they take as their reference, namely, the bundling of teaching *and* research (and where – I am afraid I cannot resist the point - the unity of research and teaching consists essentially in forsaking the devaluation of the teaching function inherent in creating special research institutes or professorships)? If so, how are we to think the form of the modern university, especially the three-fold division of the scientific disciplines into the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities? Alternatively, in terms of the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form, how do we address the question posed by Habermas – for one – "is the university form of organized scientific and scholarly learning processes dependent even today on a *bundling* of functions that requires if not a normative model still a certain commonality in the self-interpretations of the members of the university – the residue of a corporative consciousness?"(ibid. : 103).

The question nevertheless may be confusing, since it

is natural for many to claim that it is no longer possible to anchor ideas in this way. We have therefore to explain the substance of the thesis in a different way, one that need not make for a messy dialogue of disciplines, to say the least, or substantivize a whole terrain in terms of the totalizing conditions of modern knowledge. [6] In fact, I think people debating interdisciplinarity within institutional structures have been less clear than they might have been on this issue, leading both to some unnecessarily extravagant claims and to some irrelevant 'refutations'.

Again, this seems to be not so much an argument as a statement of the position to be established. We need to be looking further. One could understand the picture underlying the argument about the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form as consisting of two parts. The first part holds that the university institution converts what is not an end in itself into something that is an end for the educational system as a whole – 'reason', culture and/or 'excellence' where the university as a form situates its object. I have already alluded to some fragments of this picture in the preceding section, although we could partake of a further thought here. The fragments of this picture do not see the general notion of university form as having any importance; for them, the important change lies in what universities take their concepts and relations to be. This goes along with construing modern universities as not simply educational institutions, a step made possible by further classifying universities as institutions overseeing the object of the furtherance of knowledge. Solely on these grounds perhaps, it is very much a challenge to determine whether, insofar as the modern university probably never had a premonition of what would become of it, its evolution cannot be reasonably viewed as the result of implementing an *a priori* idea.

The second alludes to the fact that the university's bundling of functions – the combination, specifically, of teaching *and* research – gives us no reason to be recasting the institutional edifice, but does give us a reason to be eschewing its formalization as a normative model. Accordingly, on this view, we are not conferring a new currency to the institutional edifice of the university, but rather forming a new belief about what the university's form really is. Indeed, to the extent that the university institution both provokes a claim to autonomy and right and is entrenched by them, the relations reiterating the university institution as such would appear to be individualized through a discourse of 'purpose', ascribed to the institution as attribute or internal content rather than social effect. If this means reifying the university institution as such, so be it, although of course we must guard against the egoism of institutions.

III. A Short Line on Academic Freedom

I think the whole discussion about 'academic freedom' is somewhat flawed in this light. While being 'agent-centered' – focusing as it does on the politics of liberal education and given over to claims about curriculum and improving education generally – the debate has tended to confuse the consequences of positive facts about institutional conduct with the consequences of negative facts about the same; for example, between what comes about because institutions act in a certain way and what comes about because they do not act this way or that. [7]

The perception underscoring various strands of liberal learning that concern with contemporary political and social issues is the very opposite of education clearly is untenable and would need to be altered, although it is an intrinsic requirement of socio-political engagement and discourse, within the university or outside, that norms of civility and argumentative soundness be rigidly upheld. Of course there can be variations on this stance. Ronald Dworkin, for instance, has argued that, although academic freedom is not a simple derivation from the right to free speech, it nevertheless expresses the ideal of ethical individualism that animates liberal political morality. In this view, the local practices of American universities are embodiments (albeit imperfect ones) of political first principles. Richard Rorty, on the other hand, forgoes any appeal to first principles and, consistent with his pragmatism, asserts that institutions do not need "foundations". Dworkin and Rorty, however, both take for granted the principle that the ideal of the university can be realized only in a liberal political culture that is much like their own. [8] Nothing in what I have said above in the preceding sections presupposes this delimitation, however. A sharply contrasting focus comes from Edward Said, who defends the ideal of freedom of inquiry by reference to the historical experience of universities in many parts of the world, including the countries of the Middle East. For him, there is no single paradigm of the university as a social institution; they are as diverse as the societies that harbour them. Yet, as Said usefully reminds us, this does not mean that universities are obliged to articulate the cultures in which they find themselves. On the contrary, intellectual freedom demands that people in the academy be ready to risk their identities as practitioners of particular cultures in order to understand the cultures of others.

Of course, there is a riposte to all this. But it is also the point where, maybe, a truer engagement could begin. Exactly what it comes to – just what line is being drawn

between the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form and the work of disciplines internal to that form, as indeed the question of academic freedom – is clearly sensitive to details of one's account of disciplinary practices and the individuation of their contents through distinct trajectories and historical circumstances. The main challenge, I think, concerns its generalization across the university institution as such. It is to be noted that the double constraint – the university as functionally specific and yet differentiated (across schools, faculties and disciplines; between administration, teaching and research; between utilitarian and non-utilitarian self-definitions of purpose and functioning) – articulates itself differently in different national situations. Indeed, it constitutes something like a general law of the reproduction of universities in their modern incarnation. But here too, as our foregoing reflection has tried to disclose, the question of the predicates being brought to bear on a re-envisioning of the university institution as such comes up.

Even as we cannot take for granted that there still is a single, unifying idea effectively informing the institution of the university, we cannot lose sight of its locus of exclusivity either, what for us has consisted in the self-understanding of learning processes organized in university form (and which any restructuring exercise of the university institution as such would have to submit itself to). Obviously, the present choice of a principled pragmatism as opposed to (shall we say) corporate takeover has overseen a rationalization of disciplines that has rendered more precarious than ever the ability of the university to function as a source of critical knowledge.

Notes

1. Note the echo here, distinctively Kantian. For a taste of the flavour of Kant in this context, see the lectures reproduced in his *On History* (1963). Obviously, Hamlyn's thoughts seem to articulate into this register. In Oakeshott (1990), of course, the reflections come to acquire a tenor that is distinctive. For him, universities as places of education have three essential characteristics: they are serious; they are places of study; and they are detached, apart from the rest of the society. It follows, on this register, that concern with contemporary political and social issues is the very opposite of education.
2. I am drawing this question, including its specific syntax, from Weber (1999). The piece was serendipitously accessed from the web following a Google search with the entry 'Samuel Weber'. The essay, among other things, works with and problematizes Readings.
3. See also Machlup (1982 passim). For another perspective on the (non-)relationship between the natural and human sciences, see Marcus (2002) and Moore (2002).
4. For a recent attempt – but one that combines and often conflates the intellectual and administrative parameters of institutional assessment – see the report edited by Partha Chatterjee (2002). Some of the institutions that Madan has named are surveyed here. For another perspective, see Sethi (2001).
5. I am afraid I am unable to supply the references here, although of course we have the protracted locutions of Mazlish (1998) to contend with. See also the reports anchored by the Knowledge Commission under Sam Pitroda, as also the Yashpal Committee on rejuvenating Indian universities. Doubtless, the question of institutional identity and location is important, with the problems of research and researchers within the university set-up not always overlapping with those of research establishments or research institutes.
6. Incidentally, Vinay Lal (2002) has thrown in a consideration about interdisciplinarity as well, pointing out that "all but those who have a Jurassic mentality, or a personal sense of entitlement which makes them view their own discipline as a fiefdom, have in principle embraced interdisciplinarity" and that "interdisciplinarity, for all its virtues, is scarcely the way of freeing academic disciplines from their constraints and limitations that it is made out to be" (2002: 148). He even goes on to add that interdisciplinarity "serves as a perfect pretext for market expansion" and often is directed at "some notion of convergence, or the elimination of substantive dissenting views" (ibid. : 148, 149).
7. On the politics of liberal education and associated questions, see the special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1990). Some of the contributions to *Seminar* (2003) also reproduce this measure, although Bhargava (2003) bucks this trend.
8. See the essays by these scholars in Menand (1996). Several of the other contributors in this collection address the question of whether universities can be justified as expressing a distinctive ethical and intellectual culture, and, if so, how that culture might itself be defended. Note my allusions here are drawn from a review of Menand's collection by Gray (1997).

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