

# The Postmodern University, Research and Media Studies

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## *Abstract*

This article considers three defining ideas of the university: the *collegium* dedicated to the pursuit of truth, the *national* institution, and the driver of *research*. It argues that all such are no longer sustainable and each is undermined by the *postmodern university*, an institution that proffers simultaneously a plethora and a dearth of ideas of the university. The postmodern university is an oxymoronic institution, a collection of differences devoid of distinguishing characteristics and lacking in internal unity. This poses major problems for the standing and practices of the human sciences, thereby of Media Studies and cognate areas.

## Introduction

The university is amongst the oldest institutions in the world. Almost one thousand years of continuity since the foundation of the University of Bologna in 1088 is by any measure an impressive achievement, comparable to the longevity of the British monarchy. In comparison institutions such as America's Supreme Court, the European Union, even the Canadian nation, are jonny-come-latelies. The university has survived so long, of course, by acting somewhat like the British Royal Family. The latter proclaims a genealogy as far back as Alfred the Great in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but has introduced new lineages when necessity demanded, adopted the name Windsor when the German affiliations of the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha threatened embarrassment in 1917, nowadays remains judiciously silent about its sectarian religious precepts.... In a similar sort of way, by adapting to change and reinventing itself periodically, so has the University endured. Thereby it has managed to keep on keeping on, periodically refashioning to ensure continuity.

What I am particularly interested in here is *postmodernity*, a useful catch-all term for a host of characteristics and trends that challenge, shape and even threaten universities in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In what follows I shall outline features of the *postmodern university* – an attendant feature of postmodernity and, as such, a deeply contradictory and fractured formation - and make some observations about its consequences for the human sciences along the way.

I will suggest that, as the postmodern university turns itself inside out and upside down, then so are the human sciences similarly riven. Let me stress that I do not doubt the university will continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but such are the pressures on it nowadays that serious questions must be asked about what, if anything, of consequence will continue inside institutions titled universities. Similar questions may need to be asked of the human sciences too. By the same token, there are concerns to be raised about the position and future of Media Studies and cognate subject areas.

## Ideas of the University

To address these questions we need to begin with asking what it is that distinguishes and defines the university. No one suggests that the university nowadays is the same as that which predominated even as recently as the 19th century, continuities of arcane address and ceremony excepted. How could it be otherwise? The vast majority of universities are actually very new, despite the ancient title. In Britain, for instance, fully three-quarters of our universities were founded since 1960, with thirty of the hundred or so came into existence overnight in 1992 when the then Conservative government, in a remarkably radical measure that set in train an enormous expansion of student participation, so decreed. A generation ago scarcely 10% of 18-year-olds in the UK entered the university; today it is nearer 40%, the bulk of the numbers taken up in the newer institutions, frequently studying in modish areas such as Business and Management, Information Technology and Media Studies.

These new universities were quick to equip themselves with the regalia of proper universities - sumptuous ceremonial gowns were ordered, coats of arms commissioned, and titles of Vice-Chancellor and Dean proliferated - but their *nouveau* status keeps slipping through (e.g. one rather superior new university, Oxford Brookes, in 2005 actually bestowed an honorary degree on Jeremy Clarkson, an acid-tongued, ill-educated and opinionated television celebrity known chiefly for his laddish humour and enthusiasm for Formula One racing and gas-guzzling motor cars<sup>1</sup>; the well-established universities stick to the likes of the retired Cabinet Minister and Nobel Laureate when distributing their honorary degrees).

There remains the feeling that the post-War majority aren't quite the genuine article, rather like the *nouveaux riches* who can't quite become 'gentlemen' however much they strive. Oxford and

Cambridge (Oxbridge) continue to epitomise the British university. Just about any news item on higher education shows the cloisters of Oxbridge colleges rather than the concrete urban block that is the most common experience<sup>2</sup>. This is perpetuated in our literary tradition too. Ian Carter (1990)<sup>3</sup> years ago wrote a superb sociological analysis of 20th century novels that feature university life. Carter complained (before leaving Thatcher's Britain to get a job in New Zealand where, to the best of my knowledge, he has made his home) that 'almost all British university novels play modest variations on one of three linked stories: how an undergraduate at Oxford (usually) or Cambridge came to wisdom; how an undergraduate at Oxford (usually) or Cambridge was stabbed in the back, physically or professionally... and how rotten life was as student or teacher outside Oxford and Cambridge' (p.15). Such representations are frequently televised and even made into movies - for example, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Glittering Prizes*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Porterhouse Blue*, the Morse detective series set in Oxford.

Round 1994, a C.S Lewis book *Touched by Joy* (not, thank heaven, his much better known to cinema-goers, *Chronicles of Narnia*), was made into the movie *Shadowlands*. This commercially successful film highlighted the life of Lewis, movingly played by Sir Anthony Hopkins as the late middle-aged Magdalen College bachelor don, whose life is turned upside down by the arrival of a younger and fated American woman (Joy). The film is beautifully shot in and around Magdalen, one of the most magnificent Oxford colleges, and much attention is paid to the common room gossip, ceremony and exchanges of wit amongst Lewis and his tweed suited, gowned and sherry sipping colleagues such as J. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*) and Lord David Cecil (an aristocrat and Professor of English Literature at the university). The deer park, the luscious lawns and the players themselves look just as a proper university should. [A recent fellow of Magdalen reports that tourists, walking in the grounds (as they are so permitted most days after noon) have been overheard to voice their disappointment at not coming across any 'real' dons - those bejeaned

and T-shirted men and women walking across the lawns (the privilege of Fellows) surely couldn't be the real thing. I like to think Jean Baudrillard would have enjoyed that].

Yet perhaps there is something in the tourists' expectations. To a significant degree this perception echoes an influential idea of the university that was developed in 19th century England and still hasn't altogether disappeared. I refer here to Cardinal Newman's<sup>4</sup> famous conception of the university as a *collegium* of pupils and scholars dedicated to preserving and transmitting *universal truths* in a context of residential proximity. In the UK Newman's Catholic conception of the university fitted readily with Matthew Arnold's<sup>5</sup> insistence that universities should expose the young to 'the best that has been thought and known', the primary goal being 'the pursuit of true judgement'. Fellows of the university - better still the college - would be located in a self-consciously designed 'ivory tower', alongside their pupils, but apart from the world. They would be studious - learned in Classics, Divinity and History especially, and socially well regarded, an elite (as their students) who would cultivate the characteristics of the 'educated', and thereby discerning, gentleman in small group activities (the Oxbridge 'tutorial'). Well into the late 20th century this conception of the university was maintained amongst many in and outside of the university. It would be, in F. R. Leavis<sup>6</sup> terms, a locus of moral sensibility that would cultivate 'discrimination', or to Michael Oakshott<sup>7</sup> the 'intellectual capital' of civilisation.

The plethora of recent complaints, of what one might call *narratives of decline* from a golden age of the university (typically dated as the late fifties and early sixties), suggests that something of this idea continues to resonate, especially amongst older academics<sup>8</sup>. It was certainly a view that I shared when I went to university at aged 18 late in 1969 - and there were no tuition fees imposed and non-repayable maintenance grants then were distributed to students - and the aspiration for university as a *residential experience*<sup>9</sup> remains strong especially amongst the English professional middle

classes (who in large part have enjoyed such an education). This is a view readily laughed at as hopelessly nostalgic, when for instance half the students in London's many universities live at home<sup>10</sup>. The price of mass higher education, of access to the university for 4 in 10 of the age group, is that the cushioned staff and students of yesterday, when classes were rarely bigger than 7 or 8, must go (when I went to university only 7% or so of the age group was admitted, overwhelmingly from privileged social classes and my fondest memories remain of the weekly two-hour seminar of just four students in the rooms of a renowned professor). Academics might regret the loss of tenure, the leisurely pace, and the small group intimacy, but such largesse - especially since it was socially exclusive - is nowadays publicly indefensible. There perhaps remains a hankering amongst some academics for the community of scholars<sup>11</sup>, for the goal of 'installation of character'<sup>12</sup> in the young, and a yearning to introduce students to the wisdom of Plato and Heraclites, but no one seriously suggests that we can go back to the old days.

There is another idea of the university that is readily aligned to this one, and just as readily deemed out of date. The late Canadian scholar Bill Readings<sup>13</sup> observed, in his appositely titled *The University in Ruins*, that the university developed, especially in the 19th century, as a *national* project. In this way the university grew pre-eminently as a *national institution*, one in which was manifested the nation's priorities. This located disciplines, established hierarchies of subjects and arranged entry criteria, dependent on the nation's concerns. There was national variation, but in the UK this national university prioritised the ancient universities and added key provincials such as Birmingham and Manchester to support University College London in the 'practical arts' such as engineering, medicine and agronomy. Doing so, a good deal of the Newmanesque ideals was retained<sup>14</sup>. Such a national ideal of the university<sup>14</sup> is, of course, difficult to support – it is even 'ruined' - in a globalised era, when networks of scholars and disciplines, and high levels of mobility amongst students, are the order of the day<sup>15</sup>.

There is a third idea of the university that I would wish to examine. This takes us to the notion of *research* as a distinguishing feature of the university. By research I mean contribution to original thought. There is a distinctive line of thought, traceable to Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19th century, of the university as a research driver. It finds expression in institutions such as MIT and Cal Tech. It has become the keynote of very many other universities in recent decades. Even where there is a retreat from the notion of research as the sole or primary definer of the university, it is insisted that research is essential to effective teaching. Academics routinely insist, frequently with a passion that comes from their conviction they are speaking revealed truth, that research activity is a distinguishing feature of the university since without it teaching would suffer because knowledge taught would be outdated and students would not encounter role models who are critical, questioning and struggling at the frontiers of what is known.

This is declaimed in spite of any serious evidence in its favour - and considerable evidence against it<sup>16</sup>. It is, in my view, a declaration of faith rather than anything else. For instance, it is well known that what students most value from their teachers is accessibility and attentiveness that often requires staff to relinquish their time (something deeply resented by the research-driven scholar who believes time away from research is time wasted - and, after all, it is in research where the most significant prestige and promotion is located, so this viewpoint is readily comprehensible). In addition, most research is specialised while students benefit most from *integrative* knowledge. Active researchers well appreciate this: their particular project is by its nature focussed and novel, often of little use or interest to students who get most from informed overviews of the field.

It must also be emphasised that *research is very much a post-war phenomenon*. Even Britain's greatest universities did very little original research before the 1930s. It is since the Second

World War that research priorities have advanced inordinately in the universities. Their primary function is still to teach young people who will later enter the professions. In the UK an average of 70% of all funding comes to universities for this purpose (even at the uppermost levels of research income, such as at Oxford, about half revenue comes from teaching), though one might not suspect it when one talks to academics or discusses the standing of a particular institution. In such considerations just about everything seems centred on research contributions as measured by publications, citations and value of awards.

We have in England a periodic review called the Research Assessment Exercise that began in the late 1980s. It takes place every five years or so and ranks the quality of active researchers in universities by panels of peers. The most recent RAE took place in 2007-8, a seven year break from the previous one, though this may be the last that uses panels to judge academic quality since 'metrics' (research grants and citations) could allow judgement to take place without the cumbersome and time-demanding academic panels that have previously been used to make judgements. Perhaps government has sensed the paranoia and seen the distortions that the RAE has introduced into British higher education, where leading researchers often negotiate not to teach (or not to teach undergraduates), or at least not to teach much, and where salary scales, not so long ago nationally similar and publicly known, are now dispensed with at professorial level<sup>17</sup> since remunerations largely depend on one's research standing. This is not to mention the avalanche of unread publications that has come about because of the RAE, where journals grow seemingly exponentially to accommodate this overproduction, though they often prosper on circulations of merely a few dozen.

How one scores on the RAE matters enormously to promotion of individuals, feelings of esteem and the survival of departments<sup>18</sup>. Less discussed, but crucial, it is also the means of



distributing about 30% of the funds to higher education that is earmarked for research. This is done according to a formula that is attached by the Treasury to the scores awarded by panels of assessors. The distribution of funds is scaled and skewed heavily toward the top levels, on grounds that excellence should be amply rewarded and that if universities are to be internationally competitive in research, then they must be large and well supported. Remembering that there are more than 100 universities in the UK, note that as of March 2006, 5 universities alone accounted for thirty percent of all this research allocation<sup>19</sup>. One might reasonably ask: is all the heady talk of research misplaced, and is the frenzied competition to get a good ranking in the RAE worthwhile, when the lion's share goes to the already mighty? This is not even to mention the problem with what is meant by research - most of it is incremental, specialised and recondite (the best bet if one seeks successful research grants, another sign of distinction that helps with the RAE<sup>20</sup>), far from the picture of consciousness-changing thought conjured in evocations of Einstein, Crick or even Anthony Giddens.

### **The Postmodern University**

I have no doubt that these three conceptions of the university (the ivory tower, the national institution, the research centre) remain consequential, but I also think that there are processes that are profoundly undermining them. Indeed, I go further to argue that a distinguishing element nowadays is the *dearth of conceptions* of the university that are evoked. It is true that every university publishes a 'mission statement' that acclaims its *raison d'être*, so one might presuppose that such institutions know what they are about. However, if one looks a little more closely, what one sees is that these mission statements are not at all about a conception of the university. Rather they are assertions of 'excellence' in everything that they do, promises and claims made each with an eye to squeezing out more resources from whichever 'client' is most persuadable.

Bill Readings, in his book, *The University in Ruins* (1996), had a sharp eye for this, noting that claims of 'excellence' abound in university PR statements, but that, since these are devoid of any underpinning concept of the university, they serve to homogenise the most diverse of things. All are excellent, so long as they are capable of generating some resource or other. Thus universities today claim *excellent* accommodation, *excellent* teaching, *excellent* international relations, *excellent* union facilities, *excellent* sports facilities, *excellent* relations with the local community, *excellent* employment records for their students, *excellent* libraries, *excellent* car parking, *excellent* student gigs, *excellent* location... *excellence* in everything (and nothing).

I believe that the absence of any clear idea of what is university is today is evident in the promiscuity of claims about what universities are. Ron Barnett<sup>21</sup> recently gave a lecture in which he reflected on this excess. Barnett distinguished between, for instance, the 'entrepreneurial' university, the 'metaphysical' university, the 'bureaucratic' university, the 'liquid' university, the 'cosmopolitan' university, the 'authentic' university, the 'ecological' university, and – my favourite – the 'therapeutic' university. Of course, these are not entirely different entities since all universities lay claim to being any or all of these – depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves and where advantage might be gained.

To emphasize: all these ideas of the university are in circulation, but they are testament to the absence of any distinguishing conception of what the university is today. I am happy to tell you that City University Sociology is excellent in everything that we do: we have the 4th best employment record of all British universities, we are located in the finest 'global city' in Europe, we are amongst the most diverse in terms of our student body, we pay amongst the highest salaries to professors in British higher education (though we can't get close to the London Business School in this regard), we are surrounded by an effervescent cosmopolitanism and Islington is perhaps the most excellently

'cool' part of London (Mr Blair himself lived there until he came Prime Minister and Cool Britannia as a concept is widely thought to refer to this part of town), the City of London is a ten minute walk from my office and that is indisputably excellent in terms of earnings capacity... But I must mumble too that I'm unable to tell you quite what distinguishes City University as a university. All I can do is tell you that we are *excellent* in just about any way that will help outsiders think well of us.

Compared to the assurances of Newman, von Humboldt, or Leavis this must appear half-hearted and self-serving. This isn't simply because we have lost a sense of the university. More important, it's because once feasible ideas have been subverted by ongoing trends. Together these constitute *the postmodern university*, what I conceive as an oxymoronic establishment, a collection of differences devoid of defining characteristics and no internal unity.

There are several reasons for the emergence of the postmodern university. The outcome is unmistakable: the university today has borders that are indistinct from the rest of society, it lacks internal cohesion, and it has lost much of the esteem it held but a few decades ago. Sir Peter Scott<sup>22</sup>, who has written quite the best account of the situation, discerns an affinity between today's Post-Fordist Economy, Postmodern Times, and the Postmodern University. The affinity is that nowadays everything is shifting, is flexible, impermanent and without fixity. Accordingly, higher education is exceptionally 'fuzzy' (Scott's leitmotif), is 'fluid', 'non-linear' and 'complex', so much so that it is not at all clear what defines the university itself (by a delightful irony Sir Peter, a former journalist, is also a University Vice-Chancellor, heading the new University of Kingston where, no doubt, he can revel in its postmodern 'flexibility' and 'fluidity'). This can be exciting for such as Sir Peter, but others - older style scholars, students looking for intellectual intimacy - it leaves bewildered.

The spread of postmodern practices and associated thought has had major consequences for higher education and, necessarily, for research. First of all, postmodernism undermines the university

from *without*. It does this by hitting at the university claim to be the privileged institution where would be developed innovative, authoritative and expert knowledge (once 'truth', more likely now 'research'). Universities that lay claim to a monopoly, or even majority, of research activity are mistaken. In the UK, for instance, major industries such as petrochemicals, engineering and pharmaceuticals conduct their own substantial research. Universities have certainly made contributions, but by and large theirs has been secondary in worth and subordinate to that conducted in the corporate sector<sup>23</sup>. When it comes to the human sciences governments eclipse anything that takes place inside universities with their mighty statistical services. It is only they that have the resources and legitimacy to conduct the major surveys that tell citizens about themselves - what they earn, how they spend, when and how they marry, how they have children, what crime there is, what occupations there are and how they change over time... This is the knowledge that allows us to understand how we live now, and it far outweighs any contribution from university departments. Beyond this are a host of bodies in civil society that conduct important research on biography (a fascinating phenomenon in the UK at least, with large sales and scholarly output, yet conducted by and large outside the academy by full-time authors such as Graham Robb, Andrew Roberts, the late Roy Jenkins and Shadow –as of May 2010 quite possibly *the* - Foreign Secretary William Hague), ornithology (thousands of amateur volunteers annually combine to track the demographics of birds, providing important information about their health or otherwise), popular culture (the Mass Observation studies continue to this day, volunteers writing diaries amassing information on diverse facets of life in Britain today), and family history (the boom in genealogy - recently the subject of a compelling and repeated television series titled *Who Do You Think You Are?* - came from bottom up, driven by people wanting to know more about their forebears). All such represents research 'outside the [university] walls'<sup>24</sup>, and it is none the poorer for that, despite occasional sneers from academics.

Not only are there such alternative sources of research, but postmodernism undermines the university from without by asking what is so special about the university when so many people now have access to the Internet which allows us to enter and access no end of knowledge whenever we want, wherever we are, and for and from whomsoever interests us (Wikipedia has over 3 million separate entries as of August 2009). Or again, what distinguishes a university when nowadays we have umpteen alternative sources of knowledge, on the Net itself of course, but also in the plethora of think tanks such as the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Brookings Institute or the Heritage Foundation, or in those research and development centres located inside corporations like Shell, Citicorp and British Telecom, or in knowledge intensive organisations such as the BBC, Nokia and Channel Four? Michael Gibbons<sup>25</sup> also rightly objects that not only is universities' monopoly on the development of knowledge challenged, but also that their claims for authority are compromised because they have over the years produced millions of graduates who are equipped to reflect critically - and that this includes being sceptical of the claims made by universities about the standing of their own research.

Let me here add another word about the human sciences, particularly my own discipline of Sociology. Our task is to identify and explain how we live together in the world today. Over recent decades, Sociology has felt inferior to the hard social sciences such as Economics and Psychology that are determinedly quantitative and keen to emulate the advances of the natural sciences. As such, econometric analysis prevails in Economics and much Psychology appears a branch of physiology. A good deal of Sociology has felt second rate when set against these social sciences. This is why, I think, the privileged method in sociology has been the *social survey*, combined with virtuoso statistical ability (notably log linear analysis) to assess findings. There have been some aggressive expressions of contempt for alternative methods such as ethnography and life histories<sup>26</sup>. What a surprise then to find ourselves amid what has been called a 'crisis of empirical sociology'<sup>27</sup> wherein

the survey is itself regarded as outdated. You want to get a sample to study consumer habits? The supermarkets have already got much richer - indeed just about complete - data. You're interested in urban commuting? Well, the Oyster card system for London Transport and the number-plate recognition records of traffic movements has the data down to the level of the individual's daily travels. You're interested in friendship circles? Facebook knocks out of the water any comparable attempt by surveys.

The emergence of *transactional data*, routinely recorded for travel, spending, dating, book-buying, education - just about any activity, means that disciplinary claims are becoming indefensible. What's worse, the idea that universities, staffed with sociologists, are the privileged way of understanding social relationships is thereby unwarranted. Amazon, E-Bay, MySpace, the phone companies, the credit card agencies, airport check-ins....., these reveal more about how societies are constituted than any sociological survey can possibly attempt. In this situation, what is the future for Sociology when *outside* the university the information being gathered and analysed by non-professionals is so much richer than we can gather from within?

If this is another nail in the coffin for the university, then globalisation exacerbates this undermining of the established university. To adopt the felicitous terminology of Lance Bennett<sup>28</sup> *epistemic networks* now traverse the world, different knowledges being available from far distant parts immediately via information and communications networks as well as by the increasing presence of international students on one's campuses. This is one major reason, according to Bill Readings, why the university's national roots are becoming obsolete and its knowledges 'derefere[n]tialized'. More than this, however, the migration of peoples means that globalisation isn't a matter of bringing ideas and information from far to near; it means the far is nearby, in the close physical proximity of populations once seen as exotic. In Birmingham, for instance, where around 25

% of the population is of colour (in London it's at least 30%), it meant that globalisation starts right next to the academy (it was astonishing for me to realise in short time at the University of Birmingham from 1999-2002, that, while the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) had been to the fore in bringing excluded issues such as race and working class youth into the academy, there was next to no contact at Birmingham despite the close physical presence of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Punjabi groups - the university of choice for such as these, where there was one, in Birmingham was the University of Central England). Until quite recently most English universities contained departments teaching European languages, history and literature such as French, Italian and German. Scarcely any offered study of Hindi, Gujarati or Urdu. Globalisation seriously questions this historical prioritisation and the knowledge once promoted inside universities.

Postmodernity also undermines the university from *within* because what we find, in this vastly expanded and transformed institution, is that there is no longer any collective entity, so that the old conception - that a university is a community of scholars, doing different tasks, but united in commitment to a common pursuit of enlightenment - goes up in smoke. There is no 'inner life' in the postmodern university, and all imaginings of such, perhaps of a coterie of elderly dons in erudite disputation, are fantastical. Quite to the contrary, all we come across in the postmodern university are conglomerates of 'differences'<sup>29</sup>, a bewilderingly complicated milieu in which physicists cannot (and do not even try) speak to economists, and where nuclear physicists can make neither head nor tail even of theoretical physicists. Indeed, the same goes for every 'discipline', and the closer one looks the more one appreciates that conceptions of unified gatherings of scholars is an illusion<sup>30</sup>. Instead, we have huge numbers of people, with radically different interests and agendas, united about nothing save perhaps the ineptitude of the vice-chancellor.

Ongoing trends also denude the import of the university as a particular location. I have referred already to the importance of the residential experience, especially to the English middle classes amongst whom its decline is much mourned. It is inexorably diminishing.

I would add to this the increased redundancy of the university library. It was once the central institution of the university, and for that reason located geographically at a central point that could be easily accessed and readily admired. As we now enter the era of the 'virtual library' when materials can be requested and downloaded electronically from a desktop computer pretty much anywhere, then so the need for a library in the university becomes questionable. This is, of course, reinforced by the spread of distance learning. Initially this is coming internally through the creation of electronic teaching materials (that reduce face-to-face contact, but are remarkably convenient for students who may 'click and go' for lots of reading and assessment exercises), but in the longer term it will break out of the established university when whole programmes can be franchised. In this regard many cite the University of Phoenix, which has 300,000 students, as a pioneer. The UK's Open University, established in the 1960s, may be a more appealing model since it combines high quality academic standards without need for interpersonal relations between staff and students. In the United States a decision taken in 2007 to delete the rule that colleges must deliver half their courses on campus to qualify for federal student aid promises to speed this expansion of studying-without-attending university.

Zygmunt Bauman<sup>31</sup> adds to all this the observation that university faculty have been reduced to being merely another 'voice' in postmodern society, with no special claims to possess definitive knowledge. Where once university members might have been deferred to as *legislators*, they have now diminished into *interpreters*, whether the matter is science, literary taste or aesthetic judgement. It no longer matters much that you are called 'Professor', what you say is only one opinion amongst



many others. Depend on it, the scholar who proclaims that there is a poetic canon at the head of which is, say, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, will be vigorously attacked because this is only his (no doubt allegedly 'elitist') opinion and that an equally valid opinion puts Bob Dylan and Van Morrison in the pantheon (and St Andrews University recently bestowed a doctoral degree on the writer of *Blowing in the Wind*, as the University of Ulster has honoured Van Morrison, something achieved neither by Keats nor Shelley).

This accords with Jean-François Lyotard's<sup>32</sup> well-known argument that a principle of *performativity* (i.e. utility) predominates today, thereby undermining the one-time university justification that it pursued 'truth'. If science is no longer discovery led, but is rather guided by the search for patents and inventions, and if management and engineering subjects have fully entered today's universities, then previous arguments for the university must be forfeited. But if the former defences of what might be included in the university are breached by performativity criteria, then the boundaries of exclusion from the university also collapse, and with them the former hierarchies, at the top of which were subjects such as Classics, Natural Science and Philosophy. If performativity is what matters, then why not degrees in Tourism, Golf Course Management, Intimate Relations, or even Leisure Studies (all now present in British universities)? It is striking that the rise and rise of Media Studies (and its close cousin Cultural Studies) in the UK has reflected this trend, becoming established inside higher education because large numbers of students want to study it (many thinking it will lead to a career in journalism or television) and because the significance of media has palpably grown in recent decades. This being so, then what characterizes the university today other than its being a collection of differences, a diversity of knowledge activities pursued - and routinely abandoned - only because there is some performativity justification for their adoption?

This has been conceived as the transformation from a Mode 1 type of knowledge that is homogeneous, rooted in strong academic disciplines that are hierarchically organised, and transmitted to novitiates in an apprentice-master relationship, towards Mode 2 knowledges which are non-hierarchical, pluralistic, transdisciplinary, fast-changing and responsive to diverse needs such as students' experiences, industrial priorities, and social problems<sup>33</sup>. This plurality of knowledges must announce an end to common purposes of the university, there being no possibility of agreement on goals or even on methods of work. By extension, we must forego thinking about how to define what a university might be, instead simply accepting that there are an enormous number of very different institutions with different purposes and practices that might be called universities (for want of a better term).

The university is also being undermined because of the increasing difficulty of distinguishing it from growing sectors of industry. The suggestion here is that knowledge-rich corporations such as Microsoft, Ford and Pfizer, and even media organisations such as the BBC and Google, already possess many of the features of a university. These are brimming with highly educated employees, frequently those who possess doctoral degrees and working on cutting-edge projects in software production, advanced electronics, biotechnology or socio-economic investigation. The university can no longer be identified by virtue of its separation from the 'outside world', while at the same time many successful corporations are taking on many of the features of universities.

Questioning the once privileged role of the university as regards research subverts its former distinctiveness. Serious questions may now be asked about the supposed indivisibility of teaching and research that, in the view of many, characterises a genuine university. As more and more students are to be offered places on degree programmes, then it may be asked whether it is really essential that all of their teachers be involved in research.

In fact, there may be no compelling reason to locate research inside universities. Research Assessment Exercises, and the distribution of funds on the basis of achieved ranks, mean that resources go for the most part to a dozen or so institutions. Twenty-five percent of research funds in the UK go to just four universities, Oxford, Cambridge, University College, and Imperial College, so why not separate the leaders from the rest? Perhaps the best place for it is in autonomous centres, rather than in universities where other matters may be a hindrance. As the *Economist* put it in its 1997 review, 'an intelligent Martian might wonder why a university - autonomous, chaotic, distracted by all those students - should be an efficient place in which to sponsor economically worthwhile research'.<sup>34</sup>

All such mean that scarcely anyone can speak for, still less define, the university today. The only enthusiasts are those postmodernists who will celebrate the heterogeneity, pluralism and 'multivocalism' that apparently thrives in (and outside) higher education, but even they can find no *raison d'être* for their own employment inside a university. Many commentators now envisage the university to be in crisis if not in ruins, expressing and contributing towards a world in which knowledge is uncertain, provisional and performance-directed. The university appears to have lost its once privileged position as the arbiter of truth and truth seeking through diligent research. A great deal of what university staff currently claim is their special contribution - research - was not even attempted by universities until quite recently, has long been practiced by external organisations, and it continues to take place 'outside the walls'. Part and parcel of this has been a general diminishment of university status, its activities and judgements as well as its authority challenged within and without. In some respects this decline of deference as regards universities expresses a healthy impulse, but constant scepticism does make life awkward for those in higher education.

## Conclusion

My argument has been that the university is adapting and adjusting to continuing pressures that make increasingly difficult for it to maintain once defining purposes. It is increasingly difficult for universities to distinguish themselves as communities of scholars seeking after truth, as the national university, or as primary centres of research. That universities simultaneously insist that they can meet these and still more goals, since they are in pursuit of *excellence* in everything, merely underscores their lack of definition.

I have no doubt that universities will continue to survive, but maybe they will go on, at least in part, as zombie institutions (the living dead) since it is quite unclear what their distinguishing features will be. There is no special knowledge that defines a university, no clear hierarchy of academic disciplines, no core values to be upheld. In the postmodern university, pretty much anything is admitted, so long as it be presented as 'useful'. Media Studies, the occasional murmur notwithstanding, is safe enough for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/oxfordshire/4235742.stm>

<sup>2</sup> At a pinch there are scenes of the impressive campuses of 'red bricks' such as the University of Birmingham, founded in 1900 on parkland near the city centre and architecturally designed in emulation of the towers of Sienna.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Carter (1990), *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post-War Years*. London: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Newman (1987 [1853]), *The Idea of a University* Chicago: Loyola University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Arnold (1983 [1867]), *Culture and Anarchy*. New York: Chelsea House.

<sup>6</sup> F.R. Leavis (1943), *Education and the University* London: Chatto and Windus.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Oakshott (1989), *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakshott on Education* New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>8</sup> A.H. Halsey (1992), *The Decline of Donnish Dominion* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>9</sup> See Krishan Kumar (1997), 'The Need for Place', pp.27-35 in Anthony Smith and Frank Webster (eds), *The Postmodern University? Contested Visions of Higher Education in Society* Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>10</sup> This disguises major class divides. Bluntly, undergraduates in London who come from outside the city are solidly middle class, with the wherewithal to afford very expensive living costs. Those who attend while living at home tend to be disproportionately from ethnic minorities and the lower socio-economic groups. The difference is manifest in the institutions they attend. LSE and UCL, for instance, are overwhelmingly occupied by the offspring of the solid middle classes; less prestigious institutions such as the University of East London and London Metropolitan have students who are distinctly home living and much poorer.

<sup>11</sup> Functionalist sociology codified this ethos in the work of Parsons. See Talcott Parsons and Gerald M. Platt (1968), 'Considerations on the American Academic System', *Minerva*, VI (4) Summer: 497-523. See also Talcott Parsons (1968), 'The Academic System: A Sociologist's View', *The Public Interest*, no.13 (special issue), Fall. Professor Oliver Fulton, of the University of Lancaster, in work supported by the Carnegie institution, reported strong support for the collegium amongst academics across four nations. See Oliver Fulton (1996), 'Unity or fragmentation, convergence or

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diversity? The academic profession in mass higher education in comparative perspective', *Dilemmas of Mass Higher Education* conference, Staffordshire University, April 10-12th.

<sup>12</sup> I understand this was, and remains, the founding statement of Harvard College.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Readings (1996), *The University in Ruins* Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

<sup>14</sup> See Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (eds) (2002), *The Virtual University?* Oxford University Press

<sup>15</sup> Gerard Delanty (2001), *Challenging Knowledge: the University in the Knowledge Society* Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>16</sup> See E. Pascarella and P.T.Terenzini (eds) (1991), *How College Affects Students: Finding Insights from Twenty Years of Research* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; A.W. Astin (1993), *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; and especially the legacy of Ernest Boyer at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. See E. Boyer (1987), *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* New York: Harper and Row; *Scholarship Reconsidered* Princeton, New Jersey: Carnegie Foundation.

<sup>17</sup> In the UK university appointments and promotional ranks are as follows (in ascending order): Lecturer, Senior Lecturer/Reader, Professor. Salaries for all but professors are nationally established.

<sup>18</sup> I was at Birmingham from 1999-2002. After missing by 1 point on a 7 point scale the goal of a 4 in the 2001 RAE the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology there was peremptorily closed, though it was financially healthy and indeed then ranked first by the *Guardian* newspaper for its Sociology teaching. Sociology was then established as a separate department, with Cultural Studies distributed (and diluted) into Modern Languages. See Frank Webster, 'Cultural Studies at, and after, the closure of the Birmingham School', *Cultural Studies* 18 (6) 2004: 847-62. A poor result in the 2007 RAE for the embryonic Department of Sociology at Birmingham has now put that separate department under threat of closure..

<sup>19</sup> These are Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester, University College London and Imperial College London. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 3 March 2006, p.19.

<sup>20</sup> From 2009 the RAE has been retitled REF (Research Excellence Framework).

<sup>21</sup> Reported as 'Selfish models lose social touch' in the *Times Higher Education*, 9 July 2009, p.13, Viewable at [www.timeshighereducation.co.uk](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk)

<sup>22</sup> Peter Scott (1995), *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education* Buckingham: Open University Press. Professor Sir Peter Scott also holds the distinction of being the first avowed postmodern Vice Chancellor of a British University, at Kingston University in Surrey.

<sup>23</sup> David Edgerton (1996), *Science, Technology and the British Industrial 'Decline'* Cambridge University Press

<sup>24</sup> See Ruth Finnegan (ed) (2005), *Participating in the Knowledge Society: Researchers Beyond the University Walls* Houndmills: Palgrave.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Gibbons (1998), 'A Commonwealth Perspective on the globalization of higher education', in Peter Scott (ed), *The Globalization of Higher Education* Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>26</sup> See John Goldthorpe (2007) *On Sociology (2nd Edition)* Stanford: Stanford University Press

<sup>27</sup> See especially Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007), 'The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology', *Sociology*, 41(5): 885-899; Mike Savage (2009), 'Contemporary Sociology and the Challenge of Descriptive Assemblage', *European Journal of Social Theory* 12(1): 155-174; Emma Uprichard, Roger Burrows and David Byrne (2008), 'SPSS as an 'inscription device': from causality to description?', *Sociological Review*, 56 (4): 606-22; cf. Frank Webster (2008), 'Understanding the Information Domain: The Uneasy Relations between Sociology and Cultural studies and the Peculiar Absence of History', pp.27-44 in W.Boyd Rayward (ed), *European Modernism and the Information Society* Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>28</sup> Lance Bennett (2003), 'Communicating Global Activism: Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics', *Information, Communication and Society* 6(2): 143-68.

<sup>29</sup> Zygmunt Bauman (1997), 'Universities: Old, New and Different', pp.17-26 in Anthony Smith and Frank Webster (eds), *The Postmodern University? Contested Visions of Higher Education in Society*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Burton Clark (1997), 'Small world, different worlds: the uniqueness and troubles of American academic professions', *Daedalus* 126 (4) 21-42.

<sup>31</sup> Zygmunt Bauman (1987), *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity, and the Intellectuals*, Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Gibbons, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott and Martin Trow (1994), *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage

<sup>34</sup> Available at <http://www.dpi.inpe.br/economist/uni3.html> Accessed 23 August 2009