The university has its possibilities: Ronald Barnett, *Being a University*. Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2011

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Introduction

The idea of a university – the single idea of a university – is dead. Not to worry; there is now a pleasant view as a thousand flowers blossom on its grave: the ‘twenty-first century’, ‘efficient’, ‘world-class’, ‘entrepreneurial’, ‘borderless’, ‘virtual’, ‘market place’ etc. university, but also the ‘moral’, ‘creative’, ‘critical’, ‘not-for-profit’, ‘socially engaged’, ‘inclusive’, ‘public space’ etc. university. It is almost impossible to collect and classify all of these flowers – and yet new ones are blooming every day. A lot of work for botanists from the next century.

In contrast, the loss of a hegemonic idea (although, has it ever existed as a *hegemonic* idea?) seems to produce certain difficulties. Now, thousands of flowers compete for sunlight and fertile soil; in this competitive engagement they accommodate in different ways – better or worse – the local and temporary circumstances while at the same time pretending, almost as a rule, that they all are an emanation of the same essence: a *quality*, ‘*simply-the-best*’ university. As they compete against each other, one could arguably say that they simply all cannot be ‘the best’. The result of this competitive engagement is not only visible in modern university rankings but also in the dichotomies in which they are enchained along with the accompanying contradictions and conflicts: the ‘efficient’ vs. the ‘creative’ university; the ‘entrepreneurial’ vs. the ‘non-profit’ university; the ‘market place’ vs. the ‘public space’ university etc.

These contradictions and conflicts produce bad feelings (as well as some ‘bad faith’). On one hand, the university seems to be robbed and discharged of its conceptual clarity and ‘fullness’ while, on the other, it seems that it has only now – in this supposed ‘emptiness’ – reached its true zenith. While there is a firm belief that with this emptiness its history has come to a standstill there is also plenty of yearning for a return to the ‘original fullness’. Following contemporary discussions reflecting this dilemma, it often seems that a university knows that it has been discharged and at the same time it insists on its conceptual emptiness and mayhem. The worst feeling is that it seems ‘*there is no alternative*’.

Ronald Barnett’s new book *Being a University* (2011) stands up against these feelings, in particular the last one; for this reason, reading his book is encouraging from the first page to the last. He claims very directly, for example, that “[t]he idea that there is no alternative to unbridled entrepreneurialism should be scotched” (Barnett 2011, p. 41). Large parts of the book are actually a sturdy search for “alternative paths for the university”. And Barnett highlights arguments indicating that there *are* alternatives. In this sense, the book is not only encouraging but also convincing and challenging.

In a synthetic way alternatives are contained in the very title of the book and then sprinkled throughout the volume. Recalling Heidegger in the *Introduction*, “‘being’ is always ‘being possible’”: being is “replete with potentiality”. This point is further developed (also recalling other philosophers): a university is “understood as being-possible”; a “university has its possibilities; *and* they are infinite”, “in being ‘universities’, universities are full of possibilities”; “[b]eing a university is always a matter of becoming a university [...] being a university is

always unfinished business”; “the university has a dynamic and always unfolding being [...] its becoming places responsibilities on the university for imagining its future” (Barnett 2011, pp. 2, 13, 60, 62, 154).

The book consists of three parts. *Part I* critically evaluates the metaphysical, scientific, entrepreneurial and bureaucratic university as ‘different forms of being that have characterised the university up to this point’. In *Part II* the author explores ‘contending concepts’ embedded within the university’s historical forms: being and becoming, space and time, culture and anarchy, authenticity and responsibility. *Part III* is dedicated to ‘becoming possible’ and to four ‘feasible utopias’: the liquid, therapeutic, authentic and ecological university. We will not follow this structure but will pay attention to some cross-cutting issues the book raises.

The university as an ‘amalgam’

At first sight, it may perhaps seem that Barnett intends to outline a history of the idea – or better of the ideas – of the university, at least in the most striking stages up to its ‘death’. However, the reader soon realises this is not the case. It is not about the historical becoming of the university, yet it is also not about its ‘structural logic’ or a new style ‘classification’ of universities. His efforts are more in line with a kind of ‘magnetic resonance’: a process of scanning the thin layers of the complex university tissue, a process of identifying the ‘forms of what it is to be a university’. Perhaps some of his clearest guidance on how to interpret his approach is contained in the following paragraph from a chapter on the “bureaucratic university”:

It will be recalled that, in positing in this book the presence or emergence of different forms of the university, I am not suggesting that any one state of being entirely characterises any one university. Within a single university can be found the research university, the entrepreneurial university, the bureaucratic university and now the corporate university. Even traces of the metaphysical university have a presence. In identifying these forms of what it is to be a university, I am pointing to dominant strains in the way the modern university has become. That the modern university is an amalgam in differing degrees of these states of being constitutes part of the argument of this book (Barnett 2011, p. 50).

All of these forms of university which are in flower today: are they really incompatible, a chaotic mass of pieces of an old broken mirror which cannot be (re)collected and (re)constructed anymore? Would it not be possible to at least rearrange the many pieces to create a few ‘superior forms’ grouped according to their common denominators? This issue has excited me for some time and leads me to believe that the actual form universities take on has always been a reflection of “an amalgamation of roles and purposes or, perhaps, of dominant aspects which can be deconstructed into ‘archetypal models’” (Zgaga 2009, p. 177).

Barnett sees the modern university as an “amalgam”: it “never completely shrugs off its former stages”. It reveals itself as “a multi-layering of strata of self-images of the university, evident in the different practices and self-understandings of its incumbents”. It is a complex amalgam of its past and present and open to its future: “Many of these forms will be found in a single university *at the same time*. Still, over time, *alternative* dominant forms of the university can be discerned” (Barnett 2011, pp. 109 and 59). The different forms of being a university set out in *Part I*, which initially appears as if they have been placed in a historical sequence, are in fact constantly approached through the lens of the *early twenty-first century*. On practically every single page we follow the dispute with the present forms by reflecting on the past forms of university being and by identifying its future “possibilities”. Barnett’s book – at this point we

may have noticed its relatively hermetic title for the broad public – can be read as a current and exciting reading: everyday campus conversations resonate in every chapter. The point is not to analyse the ‘metaphysical’, ‘scientific’, ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘bureaucratic’ university far removed from the present but to identify the key issues challenging the contemporary university.

Therefore, a university is an amalgam of various ingredients: an amalgam of what-it-has- been-so-far. Yet we should not exclude its ‘possibilities’ and, therefore, it can also be what-it-has-not-yet-been: “Each university could be other than it is” and it “always has some room for manoeuvre” (Barnett 2011, pp. 13 and 61). Actually, which “university” is being discussed here? What should we in fact understand by ‘a university’? The book implies a cautious differentiation between the questions ‘What *is* a university?’ and ‘What is a university to *be*?’ Defining a university is obviously a complex and complicated issue, in particular when we consider Barnett’s enterprise here. If a university *is* simply understood as ‘an institution of higher education and research’ – what is a university to *be*? To word it negatively first, it is not “the kind of entity that can be cashed out fully and adequately in language”; on the contrary, it “transcends language” (Barnett 2011, p. 13). Even if there is a consensus on what a university is, that does not mean there is also a consensus on what a university is to be.

On the contrary, there is not only a multiplicity of ways to declare a university’s being but also many clashes on this issue. For example, the clashes over the very right to be named ‘a university’ which appear so often today: let us simply remind ourselves of e.g. the case of *Fachhochschulen* which is now often translated from German to English as ‘*universities of applied sciences*’. Why is the name, a *university*, so greatly appreciated that in certain environments almost every institution of post-secondary learning wishes to attach it like a flower on its lapel? And not just learning institutions but business enterprises as well? On the other hand, let us recall the clashes between ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities: ‘new’ universities are desperately searching to find the tiniest traces of their supposed ‘long historical roots’ in local archives, while the ‘old’ universities with their known distinguished origins have nothing else to do than blithely enjoy their existing status of the best contemporary institutions etc.

On the surface, these clashes are, as is well known, predominantly part of struggles to maintain or obtain institutional status, clashes for survival and development. In their essence, they are not (yet) *about* the ‘idea’; they are clashes *between* various possibilities of a university. Within these horizons, we need to move beyond the ongoing clashes as only being “a matter of historical and sociological interest” and to start “to inquire into concepts and ideas that might inform the development of the idea, or ideas, of the university” which is actually “the purpose of *Part II* of this book” as Barnett bluntly puts it (Barnett 2011, p. 59). This approach opens the way to answering the question of what a university is to *be* today and tomorrow.

Again, we are confronted with the concepts of *being and becoming* (this is the title of Chapter 5 at the beginning of *Part II* which I find particularly important): “being a university is always a matter of becoming a university” – thus a university enters the world – and a university “is *active* in the world” (Barnett 2011, p. 62). While being active in the world, a university “is seeking to become itself”, it conducts “inquiries into itself”, it takes “its own self-understanding forward” which is crucial, Barnett says, “to edge seriously towards its full possibilities”. Relying on Deleuze and Guattari (i.e., “becoming is never imitating”; “becoming and multiplicity are the same thing”), “more becoming” means “more multiplicity” but it should not be understood as “a multiplicity in itself”: “a university becomes a university when it shares in a collective sense of ‘university’ that has been forged among universities”, or with

other words, the term ‘university’ “refers to a collective set of institutions that owe much to each other in each being a ‘university’” (Barnett 2011, pp. 63 and 103). Therefore, a university is not an autarchy; its being is ‘collective’, inspired by many relationships.

At this point, Barnett poses a question which seems to be quite critical to our discussion: “can there be *any* idea through which universities might become themselves as universities?”. The question seems partly rhetoric – he obviously has an answer or at least he examines very seriously “the possibility that the idea of *understanding* can begin to furnish such a normative function for the university” (Barnett 2011, p. 64). Barnett is aware that some other ‘unifying ideas’ may be gleaned but ‘understanding’ is a particularly convincing one. He describes the term as pointing “to a set of relationships between believers, understandings, beliefs, knowledge, truth and the world” thus linking “believers to the world, via knowledge”. The task of universities is to facilitate the entry of “potential believers into valid knowing relationships with the world”. Thus, *understanding* is definitely a much larger concept than any traditional one (“either research or teaching” as he adds a little later) which today perhaps better explains what the university is and not what the university is to be.

Between a ‘concept’ and an ‘institution’

The concept of ‘understanding’ brings forward another argument for why ‘being a university’ cannot be approached (merely) in terms of its historical-institutional appearance. The first pages of the book include the claim that “[f]or two thousand years or more, we were in the presence of the metaphysical university”, that is “a university that was informed by large ideas”. Obviously, this point is not made about the Bologna or Sorbonne University (a simple calculation helps us figure out that the ‘metaphysical university’ should be at least another thousand years older). We guess that the first European universities can only be the ‘emanation’ of a deeper and much older background principle. “Over time, as stated, an encounter with knowledge was variously held to open up a relationship with God, or the universe, or the State or even being itself. The university was the institutional and pedagogic embodiment of such ideas: the university offered salvation in one or other of these forms” (Barnett 2011, p. 11).

In this sense, one can distinguish between a university as an ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ (‘spiritual dimension’) and a university as an ‘institution’ (‘governance dimension’), for example as an “institution that Europe can most justifiably claim as one of its inventions” (Renaut 2002, p. 119). If the birth date of the latter is usually recognised in the European High Middle Ages, the birth date of the former can only be found much earlier – at the ‘dawn of European culture’ as has been articulated in popular discourse – and devoid of its ‘institutional and pedagogical’ skin.

In discussing other potentially ‘unifying ideas’ we follow Barnett’s reconsiderations of broadly discussed university attributes like ‘*quaere verum*’ and ‘enquiry’, ‘critical debate’ and ‘dissensus’, ‘place of rational conflict’ etc. These concepts owe a lot to the period when the ‘metaphysical university’ was established. However, we need to reconsider them now in a modern light. What gives a decisive advantage – within the discussion on being and becoming a university – to the concept of understanding is that it “opens a path into the ways in which universities might help to develop society’s understanding of matters; indeed, the world’s understandings of matters. The world *is* its oyster” (Barnett 2011, p. 65). As I comprehend it, this point decisively affirms a university as being “*active* in the world”. However ‘unified’ on

the basis of the concept of understanding, a university is “not entirely autonomous”: it is “in the world and of the world” (Barnett 2011, p. 70).

It seems neither arguable nor feasible to yearn for a return to the presupposed original ‘fullness’ of the (‘pre-institutional’) ‘metaphysical university’; a university in its becoming discovers ever new possibilities which are not simple deviations from the original ‘fullness’ but always essentially contribute to the continuous refreshing of the ‘amalgam’ with ever new ‘substances’. The university’s becoming is *irreversible*. A university as a conceptual framework which assists potential believers enter into valid knowing relationships with the world could also be applied to the early philosophical schools, e.g. Plato’s Academy. It is different with a university as an institution, e.g. with the University of Bologna. A new form of university – a university as an *institution* – includes the previous form but only after being melted into a ‘refreshed amalgam’. Only now is it fully “in the world and of the world”. This is a point of no return: no return to the ‘ideal past form’ or ‘nuclear form’. We need to live with the possibilities which have been discovered and disclosed. The enigma to be considered and responded to today is to *understand* the new possibilities of a university and to broaden them – but not to mourn because of the ‘unfair fate’. This is, finally, how I understand Barnett’s search for ‘feasible utopia’.

Here it is necessary to involve the concept of ‘circumstances’, world ‘circumstances’. A university, being active in the world, “is caught in its own empirical circumstances” (Barnett 2011, p. 70). Now, it is being challenged by both external and internal circumstances (although here we leave the latter to one side). A substantial change in these circumstances is influencing the form of the university as well as its ‘self-images’. The circumstances of today, in particular, do away with the illusion that the idea of the university can be kept ‘adequate’, that is, in its ‘nuclear form’, isolated from the world. “The idea of the university as a place of rational conflict presumes that the university can seclude itself and establish intellectual borders between itself and the wider world so as to preserve its argumentative integrity. But that world has passed. Now, the world is in the university and the university is in the world. The university-as-debating-society separate from the world is now an inadequate idea of the university” (Barnett 2011, p. 69).

That world has passed by. However, there is lot of yearning at universities today for a return to their ‘original fullness’, a ‘paradisiacal state’ of ‘full autonomy’. Sometimes it seems that this could be an intentional illusion. The vast production of ‘self-images of the university’ does not preclude a university from being short-sighted in a particular way. It is perhaps better to speak about its specific ‘blind spot’. I refer to two relatively marginal comments in Barnett’s text: “self-understanding is crucial for any university to edge seriously towards its full possibilities; to become itself” he says; however, “universities’ interests in studying the world seldom extend *in this manner* to trying to understand themselves” or, in other words, “universities would study everything else in the universe before they study themselves” (Barnett 2011, pp. 62 and 138). These are very critical words indeed. Therefore, in this context ‘self-understanding’ is a ‘jeopardized category’; actually, it is a ‘self-jeopardized category’.

This specific blind spot and its self-jeopardising potential have much to do with the complex relationship of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ dimensions of a university, a relationship between the ‘university-as-debating-society’ and the wider world around it. There is, for example, much ado today about the ‘intolerable interference’ of ‘external actors’ in ‘academic business’. To be very clear: it is not my intention to apologise for any kind of such interference (on the

contrary!) but to dispute its popular, ‘too easy’ understanding within academia. And this is another area where I find encouraging provocation in Barnett’s book.

A university confronts its ‘circumstances’, that is “pragmatic conditions of its being” but, conversely, “there are also imaginative possibilities. All universities have some space in which to identify their feasible options. Characteristically, universities draw those options rather narrowly” (Barnett 2011, p. 70). Again some murkiness is added to the picture, although even greater murkiness can be found earlier in the book. Thus, for example, the age of the ‘performative university’ is recognised as an age of “a closing of the categories through which we might comprehend the university” while the “linguistic impoverishment”, “limited” vocabulary and “failure of imagination” provide circumstances within which “any policy statement or university-wide strategy [...] never *could be* a daring, imaginative, creative document” (Barnett 2011, pp. 15-16).

Indeed, a few lines later Barnett says “it is too easy to portray an unduly pessimistic picture” and claims that now “universities have to decide how they are to be in the world”. Nevertheless, for me, it is here that a deeper problem lies. Why put ‘policy and strategy documents’ and ‘daring, imaginative, creative documents’ in such an opposition? Is the problem of today’s policy and strategy documents in their ‘form’, i.e. inability of their drafters to formulate them as ‘daring, imaginative, creative documents’? Are we not requiring too much? An unfeasible utopia? Is it not the case that there is a kind of conflict between the ‘idea’ and the ‘institution’ behind it? Karl Jaspers made a comment which I find relevant here: “The idea becomes concrete in the institution”. At the same time, he warned that “‘institution’ necessarily implies compromises” and that the “idea is never perfectly realized” (Jaspers 1959, p. 70).

Realising utopias may be a dangerous, a very dangerous business: at last we acquired some experience of this danger in the past century. Yet this danger does not diminish the value of discovering the limits of the possible and strengthening our imagination. The point is, in my comprehension, that these two horizons – the ‘spiritual dimension’ and the ‘governance dimension’ as I called them above – should never overlap: these are two extreme discourses. Mythical heroes were ‘daring’ and, in a certain sense, radical thinkers were also ‘daring’ – but bureaucrats? Was it not Max Weber who banned them from ‘being daring’?

At this point I am reminded of Maarten Simons and his paper on the ‘Renaissance of the University’, published in this journal a couple of years ago. He says that the modern idea of the university has been embodied in “the kingdom of truth or an intellectual self-governing community or republic that transcends the ‘civil kingdom’”. However, the ‘civil kingdom’ is still here; even worse, it is part of the world which requires *understanding* and not sublime ignorance. Simons does not approach the university as an ‘amalgam’; yet he points out “the hybrid character of the modern university housing both governmental and spiritual technologies”, i.e. “the principled milieu (with the persona of the academic as critical intellectual)” and “the governmental milieu (with the persona of the state official or government expert)” (Simons 2007, 439 and 433). This ‘hybrid character’ is a necessary condition for a university being-active-in-the-world. It would be impossible if a university was not being-active-in-the-world.

Therefore, we should perhaps take a further – and more radical – step when reconsidering the university and its possibilities. Reconsiderations of the university today seem to be almost an exclusive occupation of those who live and work at universities (despite the ‘blind spot’ discussed above). Are they (we) the most appropriate people to do this serious business

seriously? Is not their (our) ‘blind spot’ contraindicated by such a task? These reconsiderations can either be led by internal academic interests (‘academic ideology’) or a ‘disinterested search for the truth’ (it would be difficult to imagine a public-private incentive for such an enterprise). Yet, how does one stay ‘disinterested’ vis-à-vis these issues while living and working within an institution which substantially determines one’s life and work? Is *radical understanding* – or better: radical self-understanding – possible within these limits? Would it not be necessary to withdraw and step ‘outside’ and be ‘external’ to a university? Is there any other feasible strategy to enhance our imagination on the way to a ‘feasible utopia’ like the ‘ecological university’ as “a university whose time has come” (Barnett, 2011, p. 141)?

Let us end with a historical parallel: the distinguished scholars of the Enlightenment worked outside of university institutions – just a few decades before von Humboldt. There was an obvious discontinuity between the traditional university institution of the eighteenth century and that from the period of Romanticism. In the eighteenth century universities were weakening and revolutionary France “proclaimed in 1793 their *de jure* abolition”, thus paving “the way for the rise of the specialist colleges (*grandes écoles*), simultaneously, the eighteenth century crisis triggered a response in Germany whereby the nineteenth century became the golden of German universities” (Renaut, 2002, pp. 121-122). Can we expect the eventual transition towards the ‘ecological university’ to be easier than the transition from the tired university of the age of classicism to the Humboldtian university?

Imagination au pouvoir!

At the end of his book Barnett summarises his arguments and reiterates that the present forms of a university “should not be felt to constitute the endpoints of the unfolding of the university”. This has been a starting point of one of his main tasks, “namely to indicate the significance and potential of the imagination. Our ideas of the university are limited, in the first place, by our imagination. If our thinking about the university is impoverished, then let us dare to imagine new kinds of university” (Barnett 2011, p. 154). *Imagination au pouvoir?* An exciting conclusion for someone with an experience of the ‘68!

Searching for alternatives inevitably calls for criticising actuality, identifying the limits of the possible and seeking out ‘feasible utopias’. Barnett presents a wide range of possibilities lying before the university, sketches out utopias and thus importantly broadens these limits and encourages our imagination. All of these possibilities may fill a reader surrounded by the murkiness of the ‘circumstances of the age’, *this* day and age, with optimism. Some necessary optimism we could say. However, one issue remains unspoken: how can these possibilities be transformed into actuality? What is hindering them from turning into actuality? Searching for ‘feasible utopias’ is the necessary first step; it gives hope and optimism but, nevertheless, leads to an unpalatable question: what are the real prospects of ‘feasible utopias’ in an ‘unfeasible reality’? But perhaps this is simply a question from a notorious pessimist?

References

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