

A 'promising space': Universities' critical-moral mission and its educative functions.

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The ideology of neoliberalism, which promotes free market economies, is widely challenged. Despite the financial crisis of 2008 being seen as the failure of neoliberal policies, they still characterise many governments across the world. The opposition is to inappropriate commodification of areas of life; to the prioritisation of economic growth over other aspects of human wellbeing; and, to the inequalities that arise from systems based on market values. In the UK, higher education undergone radical changes reconfiguring it as a mass, hierarchical system, characterised by intense competition for students and research funding. Opposition focuses on: the perpetuation of inequalities, despite widening participation; the curtailment of academic autonomy by a tranche of compliances and regulations; students becoming 'instrumental', having succumbed either to the hedonism of university life or to consumerist discourse; and, the shift from universities as a public to a private good, especially since the change in the fee regime in the UK which shifted the cost of education from the state to the student. Almost two decades ago Bill Readings (1996) declared that the meaning of the University is 'up for grabs' (p.2) and we argue that there is still ground to be snatched on which to build a critical, social role for universities.

Opposition to neoliberal change in universities tends to analyse the worsening situation and carry the message that action should be taken to avoid an even worse future (for example, Bailey and Freedman, 2011; Bok, 2004; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Collini 2012; Docherty, 2011; Giroux, 2014; Holmwood, 2011; McGettigan, 2013; Molesworth et al. 2010; Readings, 1996; Williams 2012). Although these analyses imply better futures, they emphasise the dystopian aspects of what is going on now. There are fewer accounts which outline what the more desirable alternatives to now might look like (for example; Barnett, 2005; Neary et al, 2012; Walker and Nixon, 2004). This paper employs concepts from contemporary utopian studies to argue for the possibility of moving closer than now to a university education for social/moral/critical purposes. Levitas has developed a three-mode method she calls 'The imaginary reconstruction of society' (2013). The 'archaeological' mode allows us to find and interpret ideas about the role of the university which are part of their fabric, and have never completely disappeared (see, Delanty, 1999; McLean 2008). Drawing on Levitas (2011, 2013) and Cooper (2014) we conceptualise the teaching spaces of the university as 'promising spaces' in which the imagined can be actualised, at least at times. University teaching spaces promise a university education which is personally transformative and produces critical citizens and worker. In this construction, the feasibility of the everyday enactments of the utopian hope is essential, wholesale change is not hoped for. In the rest of the paper, we'll attempt to establish that, while transformatory pedagogies might only ever be imperfectly achieved, they can be and are performed on a regular daily basis.

An archaeology of the University reveals that educational and social theory has traditionally framed higher education (HE) as involving a bundle of functions. Habermas (1989), for example, drawing on Talcott Parson (1973), identifies four functions all are centred on knowledge:

1. technically exploitable knowledge for a producing wealth and services;
2. professional and vocational knowledge for the academic preparation of public service professionals
3. transmission, interpretation and development of cultural knowledge (which he also refers to as the ‘tasks of general education’, 1989, p. 121); and,
4. critical knowledge or ‘the enlightenment of the political public sphere.’ (1989, p.118).

This ‘bundle’ can be traced back to Humboldt and the charters of Victorian civic universities and is identifiable in the Robbins (1963) and the Dearing (1997) Reports. However, in conditions of ‘unbundling’ (Barber et al, 2013) our interest is in the last three functions seen in students’ acquisition of professional and disciplinary knowledge.

Two resources, which can be related (see McLean et al, 2013) showcase how university education might be imagined as contributing to a critical-moral role in society and how what is imagined can and is being actualised: Sen (1999) and Nussbaum’s (2000) ‘capabilities approach’ applied to professional education; and Bernstein (2000) theories about the distribution of knowledge applied to undergraduate sociology-related social science.

The capabilities approach conceptualises human development broadly with Sen (1999) arguing that (dis)advantage can be judged in terms of the ‘substantive freedoms [an individual] enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value.’ (p.87). The freedoms are ‘capabilities’: opportunities or potentials for individuals to be and do what they think is worthwhile, they give people the choice to realise their goals and pursue their well-being. As James (2014) puts ‘the approach provides a broadly accessible way to think clearly and calmly about the form, content and purposes of higher education.’ (p.316) (in a review of Boni and Walker, 2013). A project based in South Africa developed a capability set with a range of interest groups, including students, to guide curriculum and pedagogy to answer the question: how can universities educate and train professionals to possess the knowledge, practical skills, dispositions and values that will allow them to choose to function in the interests of people living in conditions of poverty? (Walker and Mclean, 2013)

Bernstein’s complete oeuvre develops theories about how unequal distribution of knowledge in formal education systems relays inequalities in society. A project investigating curriculum and pedagogy of undergraduate sociology-related social science in universities of different status found that whether students’ education freed them to imagine and act depended on the extent to which pedagogical practices mediated their engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Although the effort for all is great (and materially greater in the lower-status universities) what students and their tutors value sheds a more optimistic light both on the extent to which university education can disrupt hierarchies and on whether students’ identities are as adversely affected by neo-liberal values in education as many believe. In a range of universities students are being educated to be ‘reasonable people’ of the kind Habermas (1993) proposes are necessary for a healthy democracy.

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