The Fantasy of a University

Facer Keri[1], Siebers Johan[2], [1]*University of Bristol, UK,* [2]*UCL, UK*

Paper

The diversification of knowledge regimes is resulting in an increasing diversification of knowledge practices in the HE sector, both within individual universities and in the formation of different types of HE institution. This diversification reflects the conditions of complexity and uncertainty in which we are living (Nowotny et al, 2013). In this paper we will address an underlying common image of the university, a view of what a university is for, that merits critical reflection because it is operative and implicit in these changing knowledge practices. This is the *fantasy* that the university can tell us how to live and what we need to know in complex contemporary conditions. This fantasy is driven by a positive aspiration, a sense that we might be able to work out how to live well, make good choices, and do the best by people even in conditions of rapid change and uncertainty. However, this image of the university may need to be recognised as a fantasy projection – it is creating a fantastic place in the mind, a vision, which holds the key to all the questions we have. The university becomes the place that will address all of these if only we can find the right form of collaboration or connection.

At the same time, the university itself has an interest in encouraging this projection because it increasingly needs to produce an account of itself as the fantasy of others. The university's intrinsic value is increasingly contested in changing contemporary knowledge practices. It seeks 'real world' others to fulfil its fantasy of 'impact' of 'relevance' and 'meaning'. It seeks others that will allow it unalloyed congress with 'reality'. These others, in turn, cannot offer this; just as the university cannot offer all the answers to society's problems today.

As in human relations, a mature relationship between institutional social actors that are the embodiment of an essential region of human activity – knowledge, justice, politics, education, art, commerce etc. – requires a mutual recognition of the failure of reductive and mobilising fantasies of the other. At the same time it requires a mutual recognition of the power and the value of what drives these fantasies, a deep-seated human drive that we can, with F. Jameson, call 'the utopian impulse'. The resulting process can be called the 'work' of the relationship. Ironically, the utopian impulse recognises a constitutive lack in reality, in ourselves, in the other. How we give space to this lack in ourselves determines to a significant extent the character of the communities we form. Communities that allow the constitutive lack to be present are alive and open to change. The 'work' of community can be carried out in them. Communities that lack the lack, so to speak, become rigid in their insistence on identity, history and belonging, on an instrumental view of rationality and on a fantasy of how the other has to be.

Which kind of attitudes, intellectual paradigms and modes of communication are involved in a relation between the university and the rest of society that is

characterised by a critiquing and traversing of these fantasies, while recognising the utopian impulse from which they spring?

In the Connected Communities programme, there have been several projects that have investigated community dynamics and the function of knowledge regimes within them. The programme itself, with its emphasis on participatory and engaged research, is an example of the diversification of knowledge functions HE performs. Actors within the programme have their mutual fantasies and the programme itself has also developed a specific relation to universities and funding bodies. We want to consider some of the forms of knowledge that are relevant to the Connected Communities programme in order to start formulating an answer to the question: which type of knowledge belongs to a recognition of the lack as constitutive of the work of community? This perspective will allow us, next to consider the question of liberating the university from the fantasies that reduce the university to a function of others.

A leading resource in addressing this question is the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom, phronesis. According to Aristotle, phronesis (Lat. prudentia) is the ability to act adequately in a given situation while taking into account all circumstances and relevant knowledge and moral principles. It is currently being recovered as a concept that articulates practical and theoretical knowledge and therefore may act as a resource for new university-community relations. Phronesis, however, cannot be regulated or captured in a procedure. We acquire it in a continuous learning process and by imitating others who are more advanced than we are. For Aristotle, who applied the analysis of phronesis to show, for example, why the desire of money for its own sake is not wise but corruptive of community, phronesis was a reflection of a largely static natural and social world. A notion of phronesis that is applicable to the world of complexity and rapid change that we inhabit has to be thought of from the start as a) dynamic and b) driven by the utopian impulse.

In our paper we analyse two Connected Community projects, one investigating different temporal regimes that co-exist in communities: the time of the clock and the time of encounter; the other investigating the intergenerational communication of wisdom in the context of youth work in angling. In the first project the idea of the community as a lack becomes clear; in the second we see phronesis as a skill that combines activity and passivity and that connects people from varying backgrounds and with different aims in a mutual, dynamic learning environment.

The metaphors of the encounter and of angling that emerge in these projects can be used to shed light on the multiple places of the university in contemporary society; and to explore the new forms of knowledge relations that might constitute mature university-society relations that build from a recognition of the aspiration and the inevitable failure of the fantasy of the university.