



THOMAS DOCHERTY

FOR THE
UNIVERSITY

DEMOCRACY AND THE
FUTURE OF THE
INSTITUTION

B L O O M S B U R Y

For the University

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Democracy and the Future of the Institution

Thomas Docherty

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For Patrick Reilly and for Richard Cronin

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In some ways, this book has been many decades in the making; but it has taken its actual form during a critical moment in the latter half of 2010. The thought and research that has informed it has taken at least the entirety of my own career in the University sector to mature and to emerge; but that ‘emergency’ is shaped by an ‘urgency’ that derives from a very significant change that is now proposed for the future of the University as an institution. The change in question, driven by the UK’s first peacetime coalition government, is really an attack on the fundamental principle that the University exists as a key constituent in a public sphere. That is what gives a pressing urgency to the arguments of the book.

The making of the arguments that emerge through these pages, nonetheless, is a work of much longer duration. My academic career began as a student in Glasgow in the 1970s. There, I was taught by, among others, the two colleagues to whom the book is dedicated: Patrick Reilly and Richard Cronin. It was in the seminars and tutorials offered by Patrick and Richard that I realized a number of possibilities. Their teaching showed me that my future was much more open than I could ever have imagined when I entered the University. In short, through a profound engagement with the language and history of literature, they allowed me to find a sense that I, too, could have a voice, that I was enfranchised in some basic ways; and that it was important that such a widening of autonomy and of a democratic franchise should be further extended. Thus it was that I, in turn, became a teacher.

My experience as a teacher took me to Paris, where I taught both secondary level and adult Continuing Professional Development (CPD) classes. From there, I moved into University teaching, first in Oxford while pursuing a doctorate and doing my first postdoctoral research. At this time, the first major attack on the University system in the UK took place, with the drastic cuts in education funding made by the Thatcher government. Accordingly, I moved abroad to find a position at University College Dublin, followed by five years as Chair at Trinity College Dublin. When I returned to the UK in 1995, I taught in Kent for some nine years before taking up my present position as Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Warwick. Along the way, I taught in many other institutions within the UK and abroad, in a guest or visiting capacity.

This broad experience, then, forms some of the bedrock of the argument in the book. It allows me to illustrate what has been happening to the transformed environment both in the UK and much further afield over the last forty years, as those changes are experienced ‘on the ground’. That experience, though, is combined here with a deeper historical research into the condition of the institution, especially through the twentieth century and to the present crisis. In that research, we can trace the vigorous debates that have helped shape a vibrant University. The book is written in the hope of continuing that debate, and thus reviving the very possibility of our establishing a viable future for the University.

I am indebted not only to my teachers and colleagues in all the institutions where I have worked, but also to a number of individuals and audiences elsewhere. Some brief passages of the book have appeared in very different form in the pages of the Times Higher Education magazine; and I am grateful to Ann Mroz and to Phil Baty, who published several ‘Opinion’ pieces there. Those pieces provoked some lively response; and I hope the book will do more.

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Introduction

For the University

The University today is in need of friends. For some time now, in the advanced economies, the institution of the University has found itself increasingly besieged and beleaguered. It is difficult to find any simple or straightforward reason for this, given that most governments repeatedly stress how important the University is in an era where the success and increasing prosperity of the nation is increasingly determined and driven by a ‘knowledge-economy’ and by ‘intellectual capital’. Further, the last few decades have also witnessed a massive increase in the number of people attending a University, especially in the UK; and we have also seen a great rise in the number of institutions that have acquired University status.

It would be reasonable, given this, to ask how I can claim that the University stands in critical need of support and friendship. Notwithstanding the good words of politicians, however, there has been a sure and steadily generated encouragement of a culture of mistrust around the institution and its activities for some time. This goes well beyond the vagaries of a routine anti-intellectualism from parts of the popular media that sees scientists as eccentric boffins divorced from reality and that characterizes arts or humanities intellectuals as dangerous subversives plotting against ordinary lives. It has deeper roots than this.

There are at least two aspects of this negative mood directed at the University. First, there is a long historical legacy in which the University is construed as a site of privilege, and especially of class privilege. Such a view is perpetuated in television adaptations of novels such as *Brideshead Revisited*, the effect of which is to portray Oxbridge (as a synecdoche for the University as a whole) as an institution from another world. The people here have nothing to say of everyday life, for they do not live it; in the portrait, they are presented as cocooned and cosseted. This, while a powerful negative image, is also quite clearly dated. Of more pressing contemporary significance is the preservation of an entirely different kind of privilege, but a privilege that is cast in terms of ‘rights’. Specifically, what has been at stake here is what politicians have construed as the right of a government to manage things in a society without fearing contradiction from another source of potentially critical authority.

It is the latter that has shaped attitudes to the University, as also to a more general education, for the past forty years or so at least. That is to say, the culture of mistrust that dogs and threatens the sustained viability of the University is something that is at least tacitly endorsed, if not actually inaugurated, by political discourse. The debate here, over the question of social and cultural authority, might have its roots in real politics. We should recall that, in the 1970s, miners in the UK successfully challenged the centre of political authority. Edward Heath, faced with a powerful strike, went to the country explicitly inviting people to decide ‘who rules Britain?’ The people duly did decide and, in the election, they ejected Heath from office. That political mistake was not to be repeated. When miners again went on strike a decade later, in 1984, the question of who rules Britain was not posed. Instead, the government established a new kind of language for a new debate. Set against ‘the right to strike’ that had been long fought for across decades of history by the trade union movements, the government started a rival claim for what it called ‘the right of managers to manage’. At issue here was not the crudely posed question of who rules Britain, then; rather, a more subtle discourse came into play. However, the effect was the same: the government wanted to ensure that there could be no real rival to itself as a centre for determining *how* things would be run in the nation.

Thus began, in the wake of a political victory over the miners and their communities, a process whereby the government would set about calling into question many other such possible rival centres of authority. There was a sustained attack on the standing of the professions, a calling into question of ‘experts’ and the beginning of the doubts about education. This began at school level. On one hand, government complained that school-children showed little respect to teachers anymore; on the other hand, and simultaneously, it was the government itself that showed least respect. Not only did government consistently depress teachers’ rates of pay, but in addition government started to call into question teaching methods and the standing of teachers themselves. Given that many of these teachers had themselves been products of University, and had indeed gained their teaching qualification from Universities, it was not a great leap then to start calling the University itself into doubt.

When pressures mounted, for various reasons, to increase the number of young people attending University, some more radical changes occurred. First, in 1992, John Patten (then Conservative Secretary of State for Education) abolished the ‘binary divide’ between the University and the Polytechnic sectors. At a stroke, the number of institutions in the UK with University status doubled. Although the Polytechnic sector was

full of academic colleagues who had effectively been doing work that was very similar to that carried out in the Universities, there was also pressure now to start to try to assure people that this sudden eruption of University institutions would not damage quality.

At this point, we have a great paradox. Government establishes an agency that is designed to assure the people of the quality of what is going on the University sector. The very existence of this agency invites the question – an essentially mistrustful question – that goes, ‘if they need to set the agency up, there must be something to worry about’. Unsurprisingly, the culture of mistrust then flourishes in the wake of this.

And now, everyone mistrusts everyone. Teachers mistrust the Quality Assurance Agency; students question teachers; government questions everybody else; funding mechanisms have to be rendered ‘transparent’ because no one trusts the judgements made by funding bodies; examinations have to be mechanized into exercises governed by transparent criteria rather than judgement; and so on. Within the institution itself, likewise, everyone is now expected not only to do their work but also to justify their existence as workers, through endless monitoring processes and procedures. This is all well known.

In what follows in this book, I am taking sides *for* an institution that increasingly is riddled with difficulties, not always of its own making; and these difficulties are such that they frequently obscure and obstruct the real actions that a University exists to further. The argument requires several stages.

In the first place, I try to revive a certain sense of purpose regarding the University. At the present time – an extremely pressured time and a time when everything is pressured by a sense of urgency – there is not often enough a reflection on the principles that should govern the University. Instead, principles too often have given way to the demands of the moment; and thus, principle cedes place to pragmatism. In some cases, this is necessary; but in other cases crisis management becomes the excuse for failing to address or to respect principles. My opening chapter is a reflection on what might be the first principles governing the University as an institution. However, I argue that those first principles cannot be fixed and stable, if the University is to be allowed to exist as an organic institution, adapting to and evolving for an ever-changing social and cultural environment. It is no longer appropriate for us to have ‘the idea of a University’; but it is extremely important to replace that with what we can call the search to make ‘the University of the Idea’, as it were: the University is where we can figure out the future in terms of imagining possibilities through the making of an idea. Thus,

the University becomes that institution in which the first principle is actually the search for first principles.

The key word here, beyond the self-reflexive paradox, is *search*. I contend that the University is above all governed by actions of discovery; and that such discovery and inventiveness – the adventure that is a University – is shaped by a demand for an ongoing openness to possibility. The word that we usually give to that openness to possibility, of course, is just *freedom*. The chapter argues that the University exists for the extension of freedom; and that it addresses this demand by attending to questions of *judgement*. Judgement, in turn, allows us to search for whatever constitutes *justice*; and, if this is to be a justice in a public sphere that is shaped by and shared among a community, then it will depend upon a certain demand for *democracy*.

I articulate these concerns, however, by attending fundamentally to the faculties that a University will typically embrace: faculties of science, social science and arts. It is through the *search* for that which we call true (in science), for that which we call good (in social science) and for that which we call beautiful (in aesthetics, arts and humanities) that we practise this fundamental activity of extending freedom in just democracy. Above all, though, the search dominates here: there is no single and certainly no stable quality of truth, goodness or beauty. These are matters for the public sphere and for just judgements within that sphere – but the University exists to underpin that sphere.

Chapter 2 looks at the question from the point of view of the student and their relation to knowing. That is to say, it addresses teaching and learning. The claim here is that our sense of what constitutes learning and teaching has been skewed in recent times. To examine this, I look at what I call ‘the myth of the student experience’. In these days, the category of ‘the student experience’ has become central to our ways of understanding learning, teaching and the life of the student while they attend our institutions. My claim here is that this category is there, paradoxically, precisely to *preclude* the possibility of the student actually having the experiences involved in genuine learning and teaching. I thus analyse ‘the student experience’ attending in particular to two things. First, I offer a brief philosophical inquiry into what constitutes experience as such; and in this, I prioritize the notion of material transformation. Experience is both something undergone (a passive sense), but also something that founds the possibility of new agency (an active sense). I place learning and teaching in that transformational intersection. Secondly, however, I also address explicitly the realpolitik of the agreed Policy Statement of the 1994 Group of Universities regarding the student experience. The close analysis of the content

of that agreement indicates clearly a trajectory in which any sense of transformational learning and teaching has become increasingly irrelevant within the language and thought of those who promulgate the myth of the student experience. Transformation, indeed, is entirely replaced by a logic of consumerist conformity in the documents. I use this to help prove my case that ‘the student experience’, as this near-mythic category, systematically downgrades the classroom experience of learning and teaching.

The third chapter is an exploration of space. This may seem an unpromising way to go about exploring the place of research in the University. But it nonetheless yields instructive results. The chapter begins from a consideration of the relation of science research to government policy in the 1960s, and especially in relation to the technologies involved in the exploration of outer space at that time. I then trace what I see as the gradual but insistent modification of an attitude to space in the intervening decades. We begin from an exploratory looking beyond the inhabited space of humanity, and we gradually recast space in other terms, arriving at the point where space has become ‘managed space’, a restrictive environment – a nano-space, as it were – in which we look insistently within, in an activity that comes close to blending research with surveillance. My examination of managed space within the organization of research reveals a mode of thought that is concerned to restrict research. In this, I attempt to get at the underlying philosophy that has driven us towards the narrowness of ‘applied research’, focused introspectively on a specific problem, and away from the open reach of discovery that is often called blue-skies research.

The argument driving this case is one where I can then trace the ways in which the managing of space has replaced the occupying of space in our mentalities. Space, in this analysis, becomes instrumentalized. It shrinks because it is ‘costed’; and, in shrinking it also compresses or, better, contracts the imagination in a rather anorexic fashion. The governmental policy of ‘concentrating’ research in located clusters is one direct manifestation of our spatial attitude; and my case is that there is an implicit politics here, and one that is concerned at the potentially emancipatory powers of a research imagination that threatens a polity in which I ‘know my place’.

This, I argue further, has a consequence for teaching, especially in those institutions that claim to be ‘research-led’. The consequence is one that thinks of disciplines in spatial terms; and it sustains an atomization of our knowledge in terms of ‘modules’. The chapter then explores further the relation of research to teaching, and the negative effects of modularization on education and on learning. To counter this, it

proposes a different attitude to research, but one that prioritizes what we might call the temporal imagination.

Having explored teaching, learning and research, I turn attention in chapter 4 to the question of leadership. In this chapter, my analysis focuses on leadership within the institution as well as on the role of the University in terms of leadership within the public sphere. The initial draft of this chapter was the briefest I have ever written. It comprised three words: 'There is none.' However, in the revised drafts, I was not interested in lamentation and jeremiad, however well-deserved and well-founded these might be. Rather, I wanted to analyse what I see as a profound lack of self-confidence within the institution regarding leadership. Leadership happens at many levels in the University.

Vice-chancellors lead, certainly, as do registrars. However, leadership also happens at many other levels: deans, heads of department, peers among the faculty; teachers with respect to students; students among themselves. That view looks very hierarchical; and, in my exploration, I discovered that any form of leadership that remains within this hierarchical structure is intrinsically problematic. Through an exploration of the formation of leaders in the University environment, combined with an analysis of theories of leadership gleaned from within the discourses of business and management, I arrive at a version of leadership that is intrinsically more dialogical and democratic. In one way, I still believe that I could close this chapter with a four-word sentence: 'There still is none.' However, I at least try to offer a sense of what a leadership that serves my underlying first governing principles of the University might look like.

One of the most important things that shape everyday life within a University is assessment. Chapter 5 considers the role of assessment in the modern institution. It would be true to say that in recent decades assessment has become a major and abiding concern for the University. Not only have we witnessed the endless proliferation of new modes and manners of assessment, we have also borne witness to increased anxieties regarding how we can legitimize the assessments that we make. This chapter looks back at some of the reasons why we moved in the University from a system of examination (and especially of finals examination) to a looser version of continuously assessing the work and progress of students – but also of peers in, for example, research assessment exercises or peer-review of funding applications.

The argument is that assessment is a big improvement on the faults and shortcomings of the examinations procedure. However, along with the progresses here, there comes also a train of unwanted consequences. In some ways, this may prove to be a most contentious chapter, for

in it I argue that assessment has been tacitly politicized, and that the purpose of assessment is to ensure that we produce students trained in the practices of mental or intellectual conformity. That is to say, assessment starts out as an attempt to bring a wider range of positive modes of achievement into our institutions; but it does so in order to ‘contain’ them, and to ensure that what the University produces in its graduates is a mood of unquestioning conformity with social norms. Those norms are given not by government as such, but rather by a wider set of ideological practices and beliefs. The chapter, having analysed various modes of assessment, and having studied the science of assessment, proposes that we need to make a further change. The change in question here is not necessarily an abandonment of the bathwater of assessment, but certainly a saving of the baby whose imagination and invention – a spirit of critique of norms and of conformity as such – is enhanced.

Finally, in chapter 6, I come to the question of how we pay for all this. My overall argument is that our present mode of funding makes perfect sense, but only in relation to an ideology (or idea) of the University that is flawed, self-contradictory, and essentially extremely limited. That is to say: if we have a view of the University simply as an institution dedicated to the growth of Gross Domestic Product, and in which the institution becomes a two-faced service provider (on one side, business that needs graduates; but, turning the other cheek, ‘student-customers’ purchasing some commodity), then our funding mechanism is suitable. However, this is a drastically limited and parochially narrow view of what a University is, and it is a view that is helpful neither to the institution, nor to the wider public sphere (including business and commerce), nor to the student.

In this chapter, then, my argument involves a kind of reversal of our usual priorities. I replace the idea of searching for ‘value-for-money’ from the University with a new question: the question becomes how we will find money-for-values. That is to say, I turn back here to the values described in the opening chapter, and I ask how we establish the political will required to fund those. In the body of this argument, I also make a number of hypotheses about the possible future shape of the higher education sector as a whole. The chapter accepts that it is going to be difficult, at least in the present climate, to establish a political will that would adequately fund around 150 University institutions from general progressive taxation. Nonetheless, it argues that there is still a major case that can be made for a substantial input from taxation. It also suggests different kinds of institution, however, and different possible models for funding them.

The rest, as some might say, is up to politicians. However, my argument is that it is not. The rest is up to the public sphere and the community as a whole. We need to decide whether we do indeed want to have institutions like a University that can help us search constantly for justice, freedom and democracy. My wager in writing this book is that we do indeed not only want those things, but that we also need them, and we need them with increasing urgency.

That is why I am *for the University*.

1

First Principles

The University of the Idea

One of the significant ‘events’ of 1968 happened in a University. In Nanterre, on the outskirts of Paris, Daniel Cohn-Bendit confronted François Missoffe, who at that time served in the government of Georges Pompidou as France’s first ever Minister for Youth and Sport. Missoffe, who in his own youth had played jazz alongside the French polymath, Boris Vian, had an already distinguished career as a servant of the State. His political star was in the ascendant and he was certainly a very well-intentioned politician who took the issues around youth, including their physical health, very seriously. Indeed, the French had endured a very disappointing Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964; and Missoffe was effectively being charged with improving things in order to avoid similar embarrassment in the future. To that end, he had written a 600-page White Paper, detailing how best to improve things – literally, quite physically and even bodily – for the future of French youth. When he came to open a new swimming-pool facility in the University of Nanterre, however, he found that he had made a misjudgement about the mood and character of the times.

The young, and equally serious-minded, Cohn-Bendit shouted across the pool that he had read Missoffe’s White Paper on youth, describing it as 600 pages of ineptitude; and, specifically, Cohn-Bendit said that he had noticed that nowhere in the White Paper was there any proposal for how the French government planned to address the many sexual issues relating to student life. Missoffe suggested – prudishly but imprudently – that Cohn-Bendit should take advantage of the new pool to cool off a bit. Replying that this was the kind of response you would expect from fascist regimes or from the leaders of the Hitler Youth, Cohn-Bendit and some 142 of his fellow-students proceeded instead to occupy the administration building in Nanterre, this action being the formation of the ‘*Mouvement du 22-mars*’. This escalation of an action became a significant determinant of what was to happen in the next few months, as first Paris and then the rest of France found itself in the near-revolution of *les événements*.¹