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## THE UNIVERSITY AS TROUBLEMAKER

### *La Universidad como alborotadora*

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper begins by considering the claims that in many ways, the university sector is in trouble, and that there are a variety of potential reasons for this state of affairs. Drawing on the etymological insights of the word 'trouble', the paper suggests that we can situate the university very differently: we can see it not as an institution *in* trouble, but rather as a place that troubles and that agitates the mind. It is a troublemaker. It argues that the university is – *ipso facto* – a place for the agitation and troubling of minds in three distinct ways. First, drawing on the American philosopher, Stanley Cavell's, idea of passionate utterance, it considers the place of the lecture, and explores how in the encounter of this pedagogical form, the university is a troublemaker. Second, in drawing on Cavell's ideas of invitation to dialogue, the paper offers a thick account of the civic university, and by doing this, shows how the university is a political troublemaker. Third, it draws on John Williams' evocative (1965) novel, *Stoner*, to demonstrate how – through the relationships between lecturer and student – the university can be seen as personal troublemaker. The paper concludes by outlining two influential accounts of the way that academics and students can survive and

flourish in the university given the pressures that are increasingly evident in the sector. It shows how these are both problematic, and that hope for the university – and for re-imagining its purpose as troublemaker – can be found in the very ordinariness of the ways in which we talk together.

*Keywords:* university; trouble; troublemaker; agitation; engagement; crisis hope; transformation.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo comienza considerando las afirmaciones de que, en muchos aspectos, el sector universitario tiene problemas y que hay una variedad de posibles razones para que se dé esta circunstancia. Basándose en las nociones etimológicas de la palabra inglesa «trouble» (problema o dificultad), el artículo sugiere que podemos situar la universidad de forma muy diferente: podemos verla no como una institución *con* problemas, sino más bien como un lugar que crea problemas y que agita la mente. Es una alborotadora. Sostiene que la universidad es, *ipso facto*, un lugar para la agitación y la perturbación de las mentes de tres maneras distintas. En primer lugar, partiendo de la idea del filósofo estadounidense Stanley Cavell sobre la expresión apasionada, considera el lugar donde se imparten las clases magistrales y explora cómo, en el encuentro de esta forma pedagógica, la universidad es una alborotadora. En segundo lugar, apoyándose en las ideas de Cavell sobre la invitación al diálogo, el artículo ofrece un relato extenso de la universidad cívica y, al hacerlo, muestra cómo esta institución es una alborotadora política. En tercer lugar, se basa en la evocadora novela de John Williams, *Stoner* (1965), para demostrar cómo, a través de las relaciones entre el profesor y el alumno, la universidad puede ser vista como una institución que alborota a las personas. El artículo concluye con el esbozo de dos relatos influyentes sobre la manera en que los académicos y los alumnos pueden sobrevivir y prosperar en la universidad, dadas las presiones cada vez más evidentes en el sector. Muestra que ambas cuestiones son problemáticas, y que la esperanza para la universidad, y para la reimaginación de su propósito como alborotadora, puede encontrarse en la propia cotidianidad de las formas en que hablamos entre nosotros.

*Palabras clave:* universidad; problema; alborotadora; agitación; compromiso; crisis; esperanza; transformación.

## 1. THE UNIVERSITY IN TROUBLE

It does not take long when browsing through the newspaper headlines, or when watching or listening to the ever-growing number of news and media outlets, to find troubling accounts of the state of our contemporary universities, and the higher education system more generally.<sup>1</sup> Many of these headlines highlighting the demise of the university are linked to two major crises: first, the prolonged effects of 2008 bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers Holdings in the United States that led to the unfolding of a global financial crisis; second, the more recent COVID-19 pandemic.

The issues highlighted with the higher education sector are not limited to one particular geographical region; rather, they are increasingly global. In Europe, the move towards greater co-operation between member states – as seen, for example in the Bologna process initiated in 1999 to work towards more coherent and comparable higher education systems, and in the 2021 idea of a European Education Area to increase access to tertiary education and establish a network of European universities<sup>2</sup> – has led to greater exposure of individual countries not only to potential significant benefits, but also to shared problems. Analysis by the European University Association (EUA, 2020) suggests that the significant budget cuts to higher education across Europe that followed the financial crisis that began in 2008 are still being felt. In their Public Funding Observatory Report based on data collected from the member national university associations during the second semester of 2020 (Pruvot *et al.*, 2021), the EUA reports that there are still disturbing statistics which expose how recovery from the global financial crisis is progressing unevenly across European member states. They cite the extreme case of Ireland where, despite strong student growth, there have been grave funding cuts (p. 20). The report highlights how Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia have lost more than a third of their higher education student populations with the probable concomitant negative effect on socio-economic progress (p. 42). Moreover, the report finds that in four of their member national university associations, funding growth for higher education has decreased despite a rise in student numbers between 2008 and 2019 (p. 20). The cumulative effects of these financial changes are suggested in terms of a negative impact on the ability of universities to deliver both high quality graduates, and world leading research (Ritzen, 2015). In 2019, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published their first comprehensive report for a decade on the performance of higher education systems across its membership

1. This is a perspective particularly associated with the English context, but signals issues in Europe, and beyond.

2. See European Commission. (2021). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025. {SWD(2020) 212 final} Brussels: European Commission. [Online] Available at <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/communication-european-education-area.pdf>

(OECD, 2019). This was in the context of widespread concerns about the operation of higher education in a rapidly shifting political landscape. This report highlighted the difficulties for institutions of widening access and participation in higher education, while at the same time constraining costs, ensuring curricular relevance, and maintaining the high quality of provision. Its findings show that while there was a marked increase in household spending on the costs associated with higher education, over one fifth of those entering the sector left without any qualification. There were also troubling findings in relation to access and outcomes: students from families where the parents had not had a university education were 40-60 % less likely to embark on undergraduate study, and a worrying 30 % of graduates left higher education without the literacy and numeracy skills required to process even moderately complex information.

It is unsurprising then, that with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus which the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020, and subsequently a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, that systems of higher education -still in fragile recovery from the global financial crisis of just over a decade earlier- were faced with a further serious, ongoing, predicament. In England there were troubling newspaper headlines, with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) announcing that -without a government bailout - thirteen universities faced a very real prospect of insolvency (BBC, 2020a). Teaching was forced to go online because of lockdown measures in different countries, and universities were faced with having to invest heavily in technology to enable students to continue to engage in teaching and learning. But, as an evaluation of the state of higher education one year into the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted, many institutions had insufficient time, or experience, of this new form of instructional delivery to ensure success (OECD, 2021). The sudden shift online played out differently across different disciplinary areas, with the performing arts, science and technology courses, and those requiring professional placement and observation of practice, being most significantly affected. The ability of universities to progress research programmes was negatively impacted as laboratories closed and international collaborations became almost impossible because of severe travel restrictions. Universities, many of whom were increasingly financially reliant on the significant fee income from international students, saw a very substantial drop off in international student mobility (EUA, 2020; OECD, 2021), with the *Times Higher Education* reporting in February 2021 that European Union applications to UK universities has seen a dramatic 40 % downturn (THE, 2021).

While the effects of such major crises are arguably inevitable, there is a more general and persistent undertow of negative public opinion in relation to the role and value of contemporary universities. Often this plays out in negative headlines in the popular press when particular stories emerge. As an example, and on what seems like an annual basis, there is an outcry when exam results are released and

there is the rush to fill university places, that higher education -especially in those countries such as the UK where the level of tuition fees has been roundly criticised- does not represent value for money (BBC, 2020b). As market influences permeate and shape the sector, with increasing workloads as a result of cost-cutting, a rise in the expectations and demands of students-as-consumers, and with what are often perceived as threats to academic freedom, the media reports levels of stress and mental ill health amongst academics are rising (Guardian, 2019). Related to this, headlines report that staff are leaving the sector in increasing numbers in the UK because of Brexit (Independent, 2019) and in the United States because of concerns over working practices post-Covid (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2021).

## 2. DIAGNOSING THE DISEASE: SETTLING DOWN AND STIRRING UP

We might be tempted to think that it is only in the popular press that we find troubling accounts of the state of contemporary higher education given that the press takes every opportunity to seize on a good story that sells. But this would be to ignore a growing body of academic and scholarly literature that seeks to expose the perceived ills of the higher education sector. As far back as 1990s, the culture of excellence in a sector where universities were big businesses driven by market forces – and where profit margins were more important than thought and the pursuit of knowledge – was articulated in the provocative claim that the university was in ruins (Readings, 1997). In 2005, Mary Evans, reflecting on her experiences of working in a British University in the latter part of the twentieth century, announced the killing of thinking and the death of the University. She claimed to write not from a desire to hark back to some past golden age of higher education -a sense of nostalgia for a lost culture- but from a fear of the future, one where “universities [are]... institutions which only serve a very small-minded master: the rational bureaucratic state” (Evans, 2005, p. 3). And in 2018, in a penetrating critique of the incursion of market ideologies into higher education, John Smyth provided a passionate defence of the truly educative purpose of the university amid what he called zombie leadership, a culture that celebrates academic rock stars, and the relentless march of neoliberal ideology (Smyth, 2018).

In different ways, these accounts of contemporary higher education are attempting to diagnose the problem; to name the trouble. Some point to the over regulation of the sector and to the ways in which political and financial control of universities have stripped them of autonomy not only in relation to curricular offer, but also to pedagogical freedom. The pressure to increase the offer of science, technology, engineering and maths programmes (STEM subjects) in order to serve the needs of the economy and to address the skills gap, has been to the detriment of subjects in the arts and humanities. This suggests a decline in the autonomy of universities’ ability to direct their affairs in a regimen of increasing regulation (Ritzen, 2015). Degree programmes that also lead to professional qualification and accreditation

(medicine, dentistry, law, engineering, accounting and the like) are deemed to be especially valuable, and their graduates highly employable; this allows regulators and governments to judge them as offering good value for money. But such reasoning has initiated more subtle - and insidious - shifts in the perceived 'value' of degree programmes, leading to what has been called the "epistemological crisis in the meaning and value of the humanities and social sciences" (Doidge *et al.*, 2020, p. 1126). This has subsequently been taken up in the popular press who have reported the concerns of government ministers that some (arts and humanities) degrees do little to improve students' life chances (Telegraph, 2020), and there are widespread accusations of 'dumbing down'.

The symptoms of the disease are many. Some point to the preoccupation of senior university leaders with the recruitment and retention of students in order to secure income streams, and to the increasing number of innovative ways in which universities seek to outperform competitors, fill places on courses, and attract international students (Lomer *et al.*, 2018). Others point to what often seems like a fixation with league table position, and to the metrics that drive much policy and practice in higher education and that "can be used as a vehicle for humiliation...produc[ing] terrors for all those involved" (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2018, p. 29). The seeming alignment of higher education with servicing the economy through the production of highly skilled graduates to meet skills gaps, is for many, a further symptom of a sector that has fundamentally shifted in terms of its purpose. Such a shift is seen in the way that some subject areas have come under scrutiny not only in terms of their perceived value for money (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2020), but also in terms of their relevance and necessity (Moran, 2021). This kind of shift -engendered at least in part by pressure from government bodies and regulators- has led to differing, and increased demands and expectations of the higher education experience (Fulford, 2016a). All of these symptoms are in -different ways- examples of the influence of the market and the move from a market economy to a market society (Sandel, 2016).

### 3. ETYMOLOGY – THE AGITATION OF THE MIND

The university, it seems, is in trouble. But what is at stake in making this claim, and what does 'trouble' really imply? Looking to the etymology of the language that we use can often be helpful. Sometimes, it elicits a profound disruption of our everyday understandings of a word, with the rupture opening up new ways of thinking and understanding.

The word 'trouble' -from the Old French *truble* or *torble* is connoted with ideas of emotional turmoil or disruption. In the fifteenth century, 'trouble' came to be associated with a concern or a cause for worry, and in the 1550s, with having unpleasant relations with the authorities. But its usage from the 1200s

relates specifically to ‘agitation of the mind’.<sup>3</sup> What this offers is a very different way of understanding the relationship between the university and the notion of trouble. I suggest that it offers a radical shift; it turns things on their head. Drawing on this etymological insight, we can situate the university very differently: we can see it not as an institution *in* trouble, but rather as a place that *troubles*; that agitates the mind. In what follows, this paper will suggest three significant ways in which the university is an agitator of minds. However, close attention to what is suggested by this idea (and, conversely, what is not) is needed here in order to avoid any possible confusion. There is *no* sense that the role of the university is to agitate the mind in terms of causing any kind of mental distress or anxiety. Rather, it is that in being exposed to what might profoundly challenge our conventional, or settled, ideas, we are stirred – or agitated – to think, and to be, differently. This kind of exposure (literally ex-posure - being put out of position) requires “the willingness to put oneself...at stake, to free oneself from oneself, to see and think differently” (Vansieleghem & Masschelein 2012, 90). This idea radically shifts the power relations at play in the contemporary university. It suggests that the institution of the university is less a passive pawn in a larger economic and political game – and so subject to the whims of policy of whichever political party is in power at any given time – but rather a dynamic actor in re-shaping thinking and creating and shaping futures.

In a number of ways, it is easy to see how contemporary higher education is in the business of settling down (rather than of agitating, or of stirring up the mind). Much of what happens in terms of the choice of curriculum content, of pedagogical approaches, or of methods of assessment (certainly in the English context) is with a view to how students rate their experience, and their overall satisfaction, in various surveys, particularly the hugely significant National Student Survey (NSS). Satisfaction discourses in higher education are indicative of the ways in which the purpose of the university has come to be re-envisioned. This is not to say that student satisfaction is, in itself, not an appropriate topic of discussion in the university, but rather that the rhizomatic nature of these discourses has a stifling and destructive effect. The blinkered pursuit of the prestige that high levels of student satisfaction bring, gets in the way of other kinds of thinking or talking – the kind that unsettles, and that agitates or troubles the mind (Fulford, 2013).

Settling down is also at play in the way that the student herself is positioned in the university. There is arguably a progressively increasing risk – at least in policy rhetoric – that the student is no longer seen primarily as a scholar and a thinker, but rather as a customer and consumer. The student is now a consumer both of knowledge and of experience, and can exercise their contractual rights in an increasingly reductive form of transactional relationship (Fulford, 2020). What

3. See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/trouble>

follows from such forms of settlement (of thinking) is the suppression of the unexpected. There is rightly much talk in higher education about expectation: students will have expectations of their course and the university experience; universities on their part will expect students to have a genuine interest in their subject of study, and to engage with the opportunities that a higher education affords. All this is, of course, right and proper, and so to dispense with the idea of meeting expectations in education would be unworkable, and frankly absurd. But what would seem to be missing from this discussion is the place not of expectation, but of the *unexpected* (Fulford, 2016b) To encounter the unexpected is to be placed in a position where one's most sincerely held beliefs are put into question. The space of the unexpected rips asunder our cherished theories and opens spaces of radical alterity. And such spaces are profoundly and educatively unsettling.

#### 4. THE UNIVERSITY AS TROUBLEMAKER

What the discussion to this point has shown is that, in some senses at least, the very foundations of what it means to be *universitas* -a community of masters and scholars- has been profoundly put into question by some of the prevalent policy imperatives to which it has become subject. But, in a rejoinder to those who have posited that the university is already in ruins, or who have prophesied its imminent death, this paper seeks to exercise something of a reversal: to turn things on their head. This is not simply to make an unwarranted claim that things are not as they seem -that the trajectory of the institution university is not a troubling one; that would be unwise given the weight of evidence about the state of contemporary higher education. It is rather, drawing on the etymological roots of 'trouble', to assert that the essence of the university is ineluctably bound up with one of its principal functions as a troublemaker. The university is the axiomatic space for the agitation of minds. Thinking in this way elicits a much-needed shift from talk of the university as being in trouble, to a conversation about the ways in which it can realise its purpose as a troublemaker.

In developing the line of argument that the university is axiomatic in this respect, the remainder of this paper will discuss how, by virtue of the fact that it is *universitas*, it is - *ipso facto*- a place for the agitation and troubling of minds in three distinct ways. First, the university is the site of pedagogical troublemaking - of forms of thinking and learning that disrupt the expected and demand a response; second, it has a role to play in political troublemaking - in the development of just societies where its citizens can flourish; third, it is the initiator of personal troublemaking - of opening spaces for the transformation of the self.

#### 4.1. *The University as Pedagogical Troublemaker: The Example of the Lecture*

In recent decades, higher education has seen a significant shift in thinking about pedagogy. The lecture, once the mainstay of a university education, now conjures up images of stuffy lecture halls populated by rows of silent students, and the drone of a monotonous voice echoing endlessly. Perhaps not much has changed since William Hogarth's famous (1736) etching 'Scholars at a Lecture' which portrays just such a scene: a dull-looking lecturer reading from a prepared script, while the students look puzzled, bemused, disinterested, or who are merely turning away, daydreaming or resorting to idle chatter.<sup>4</sup> This is clichéd, undoubtedly, but it is this very parodied image that has led for calls to render such a pedagogical form as the lecture, obsolete. The reasons suggested for this are many: the lecture has become associated with more passive forms of learning that require little engagement from those listening. As such, it has come to be seen as an outmoded – even denigrated – form of pedagogy that is ineffective because of its lack of adaptability to the backgrounds, experiences, interests and motivations of the study body. Not only can it fail to attract students' attention, but more importantly to maintain it over the period of the lecture, leading to cognitive overload, and the potential for misconceptions to arise that remain unchallenged or uncorrected. The lecture is not, it seems, engaging *per se*. Given that engagement is one of the buzzwords of contemporary education (Fulford, 2017), this is a terminal diagnosis. Perhaps it is only inertia and familiarity that allows the lecture – at least in some forms – to survive.

The basis of much of the criticism levelled at the lecture in the contemporary university seems to originate in a view that it is rooted in a transmission model of education that has little place in modern institutions of higher education. Chief amongst the lecture's critics, Harvard physicist, Edward Mazur, even refers to the lecture's continued use as 'unethical (Mazur cited in Bajak, 2014). But perhaps the most acerbic of such criticism is the view, propounded by Carl Wieman - a Nobel prizewinning physicist and active-learning advocate from Stanford University - in his comparison between belief in the value of traditional lecturing and belief in blood-letting in an era of modern evidence-based medicine (Buitendijk, 2017). And such views have gained increased traction with the advent of the Covid 19 pandemic in early 2020, and the concomitant shift of the majority of university teaching online as campuses around the world shut to comply with periods of national lockdown. The forced move to embrace digital technology and innovative forms of pedagogy was the culmination of a move towards more digitally rich forms of teaching and learning (Laudrillard, 2002). But even before the pandemic, and since the early 1990s, there have been arguably more significant moves in favour of what have been perceived as more dialogic forms of tuition which coalesce around student-centred

4. See: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/392598?sortBy=Relevance&ft=hogarth+lecture&offst=0&rpp=20&pos=1>

activity or problem-solving forms of learning (Cannon & Newble, 2000; Biggs, 2003; Honkimaeki *et al.*, 2004).

Defenders of the lecture have been few, but persistent in advocating for its affordances as a central constituent of a higher education. In 2014, Alex Small argued that, over and above any other pedagogical approach, the lecture enabled the modelling of how an expert might approach different types of problem. Its value, therefore, went significantly beyond its ability merely to transmit facts (Small, 2014). In 2017, Miya Tokumitsu aimed to breathe life into the dying lecture because of what she saw as its value as developing the discipline of expert listening, a skill central to public dialogue and debate. “Good lectures”, she argued, “build knowledge and community; they also model critical civic participation” (Tokumitsu, 2017). Defenders such as these, however, focus their attention on the skills that the student might develop as a result of attending lectures (such as how to approach a problem, or to develop effective listening skills). Such skills as these are beneficial not only for effective study in the student’s chosen discipline, but also for future employment. While such benefits as skill development (as with the accumulation of factual knowledge) are undoubtedly valuable (and to many who decry the lecture, this might be sufficient to persuade them to something of a re-think), such defences work at one level only. What this leaves out is the ontological. The lecture, far from being a stultifying space of boredom, of disengagement, or simply of quotidian transfer of information, is a space where the possibilities of the transformation of the self can be realised.

This claim is based on a profoundly different view of the lecture, one that sees its primary function as a form of address. This is not in the sense of: “I address you to tell you this, so that you now have the same information that I have”, but rather of “I address you to let you know how I see the world; do you see it this way too, or tell me how you perceive it differently?” It is in this the idea of address that two things are at play: first, the notion of address as invitation and demand; the second of address as encounter. This is to see the lecture as a radical space not of dissemination, but of a special form of human encounter in which both those addressing, and those being addressed, are opened to the possibilities of a kind of transformation that is akin to an education of the self. To be addressed is to be subject both to invitation *and* demand; it is to be called to account and to answer the demand for a response. And it is this kind of invitation that is troubling – that agitates the mind in its framing of such a response. The invitation (to agreement, to offer a counter position, to eschew the demand) is to engage in a form of ‘encounter’, the kind that does justice to this word’s rich etymological tracings in the ideas of a meeting of adversaries. The kind of encounter with ideas that is initiated by the address of the lecturer is one that, in its challenge to our preconceptions, our received wisdom, our most cherished ideas and theories, troubles the mind, and demands our reply. For the lecturer, sensitive to the ways in which she might nurture such opportunities for encounter, and for both student and lecturer, receptive to

the demands that such encounters bring, the lecture is just one of the pedagogical forms that open such possibilities.

A richly evocative example of such invitation and encounter comes from the 1965 American novel, *Stoner*, by John Williams. This classic text tells the story of William Stoner, sent in 1910 to study agriculture at the University of Missouri from a life of near poverty on his parents' farm. As a freshman, Stoner has to take a class in English literature. He finds little difficulty with the work in his major classes in soil chemistry, but he finds the English lectures disconcerting, particularly the one on Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 73'. These classes, as Williams wrote, troubled and disquieted him in a way that nothing had done before. In a powerful scene, Stoner's tutor, Archer Sloane addresses him directly as part of the Shakespeare lecture:

'Mr Stoner, what does the sonnet mean?' Stoner swallowed and tried to open his mouth. 'It's a sonnet, Mr Stoner', Sloane said dryly, 'a poetical composition of fourteen lines, with a certain pattern I am sure you have memorized . . .'. He looked at Stoner for a moment more . . . Sloane's eyes came back to William Stoner, and he said dryly, 'Mr Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner; do you hear him? . . . What does he say to you, Mr Stoner? What does his sonnet mean? . . . Stoner's eyes lifted reluctantly . . . 'It means' he said, and he could not finish what he had begun to say' (Williams, 1965/2012, p. 12).

In this very ordinary scene from a lecture hall that might have been replicated in any university in the early decades of the twentieth century, something else was going on. This was no mere question and answer session, or a tutor having a playful gibe at his student. It was rather a decisive moment of encounter not only between Sloane and Stoner – or perhaps between possible differing interpretations of the sonnet – but of Stoner's encounter with himself. The philosopher Stanley Cavell writes about such moments of encounter – ones marked by ideas of appeal and the demand for a response – in terms of what he calls, "passionate utterance" (Cavell, 2005, p. 185).<sup>5</sup> A passionate utterance is, for Cavell, an invitation to a form of exchange, one in which a speaker invokes, or provokes the words of another. Sloane makes the invitation to engage on the meaning of the sonnet. But in the very ordinariness of this exchange, much weightier concerns are at stake: Stoner's emotional response to the sentiments expressed in the sonnet; his relationship to the subject of English literature, and (from what we learn as the plot develops), the course of Stoner's academic study and his own life. All this is initiated from the moment of trouble; the agitation of Stoner's mind that the invitation to passionate utterance or exchange (to say how the world is for him) invokes. The moment of the troubling of the mind

5. Cavell develops the notion of passionate utterance in response to John Austin's theory of language, and the idea of the performative. For a fuller discussion of the background to Cavell's idea of the performative, see Fulford and Mahon (2020).

is the opening of the possibilities for the transformation – or the education (in the sense of *e-ducere* a leading out) of the self.

#### 4.2. *The University as Political Troublemaker: Re-thinking the Civic University*

Universities exist in a political landscape to which they are ineluctably tied. Public discourse on matters as broad ranging as social mobility, equality of opportunity, youth employment, regional regeneration, the skills needs of employers, and economic growth and prosperity, all touch in some ways on the role and growth of the university sector. As political power shifts between the left–right dyad with each election, the fate of the university seems to be related to the extent to which it is seen either as a trusted agent of change, or a maverick sector in need of careful management and regulation. In the political melee that often ensues when higher education policy is up for debate, universities are not averse to attempts to bolster their position and secure their futures. In their 2011 *Manifesto for Resistance*, Michael Bailey and Des Freedman outline the kind of demands that are made on universities in the political arena, and the modes of resistance that universities make in response to those in power. Criticism is laid at the doors of universities for a range of practices: the precarity of some academic contracts; their questionable commitment to academic freedom; their outsourcing of university services, and their inadequate response to the student mental health crisis and concerns over staff workload and wellbeing. Universities, for their part, resist incessant political pressures to manage student recruitment through funding mechanisms; to ‘measure’ the quality of provision through simplistic metrics, and to exercise undue control over the curriculum offer. But universities rarely trouble the political elite in any meaningful sense. This is again suggestive of a form of settlement, rather than of agitation or troubling. Universities put significant effort into avoiding any kind of media attention that might negatively affect their brand, and commensurately, their recruitment or league table position (Downes, 2017). Conversely, they are keen to paint themselves in the most positive of lights through highlighting their successes, and commitments to worthy causes and celebrated national campaigns. In these ways, universities demonstrate that they are institutions at the heart of their communities, who share their concerns, and who stand with them.

What it means to be *universitas*, then, is to be a community (of masters and scholars) within a wider community – a *polis*. The way that this plays out often represents a particular understanding of the civic university – one where the institution is a donor or benefactor for the local community. Universities allow their facilities to be used by local communities at no, or at reduced cost. Swimming pools and gym facilities can be accessed by the public outside the times that they are needed in academic programmes. Universities allow community grass roots sports groups to make use of their outdoor sports pitches. School groups are regularly invited onto campuses to help with access to performing arts spaces or laboratories. And the

university's green and recreational spaces are open for all to enjoy. These ways of opening up the campus to a wider public are undoubtedly beneficial. They help to demystify the academy for those unfamiliar with its functions; are a way of supporting aspiration towards higher education for disadvantaged and non-traditional potential students, and they may go some way towards persuading the public about the value of taxation to support the higher education sector.

In spite of all these worthy measures to initiate and sustain community relations, they represent only a thin understanding of the civic university. As such, some have argued that a significant shift is needed away from a perception of the university as solely an economic good towards a richer conception of its role in society (Sandel, 2016). In his endorsement for Goddard *et al.*'s (2016) *The Civic University*, John Brewer writes:

Universities need to rethink what it means to be a public university in the 21st century, in part because of the loss of public funding and function, but also because they need to make themselves relevant to the global challenges that threaten the future of humankind.

This assertion poses a significant challenge to universities to reimagine their civic engagement and what is at stake in the idea of the university as a public good. To embrace such a shift in thinking is also to be cognisant of the implications that arise. As Brewer continues:

This reformulation of an old idea, the civic university, challenges us to ensure that through teaching, and civic engagement, university managers, staff and students place universities at the centre of the local-regional-global nexus, working on all three levels in order to make a difference. The civic is a value statement as much as a new way of organising higher education; it is about encouraging universities to have souls.

What Brewer seems to be advocating for here is an idea of the civic university understood thickly. It seems to position the university less as 'doing' public engagement or demonstrating public spiritedness, and more as understanding what it means to "live ethically and act politically" together in community (Brewer, 2013, p. 2). Such a view of the civic university is underpinned by a radically different approach to the way that the university talks not only about itself, but also with communities, and in the political sphere. Universities are highly effective at self-promotion and positioning. Managing this is the responsibility of burgeoning administrative functions through departments of communication and external relations. They fiercely protect their brand and straplines to send only the most positive messages out to the public. This is big business, and big stakes:

Another manifestation of business-led university management is the deployment of the language of business to strike home their market differentiation. They seek 'market and product differentiation' by means of USPs ('unique selling points'), corporate branding, 'brand promises', 'strap lines', mission statements, 'market attuned portfolios', 'value propositions' and logos as much as by scholarship – according to one management

consultant who specializes in university corporate branding, the purpose is to make universities ‘sizzle tangibly’ (Brewer, 2013, p. 103).

These kinds of approaches are another iteration of the settling down that is becoming increasingly characteristic of the higher education sector - an avoidance of any kind of trouble: of troubling headlines; of association with unsettling ideas, or of attracting ‘bad press’. Of course, much of this is simply sound business practice, and universities *are* big businesses. But to understand the civic university thickly is to understand its political relations differently. Brewer writes of the need for a “a revolution in relations between government and the social research community”, but he is thinking here only of the research impact agenda and the needs for social research in universities to help determine what works, and why, and so what types of policy initiative are likely to be most effective. But it is in realising and acting on what is at stake in its ‘civicness’ as a core value, and its force as a public good, that the university becomes a political troublemaker. In this sense it seeks less to protect its reputation through clever marketing campaigns and the strict regulation of its communications practices, and more through the way that it seeks to engage with the political sphere to address the global challenges to humankind.

In thinking about how such engagement might be realised, we can turn again to Cavell. As we have seen, his notion of passionate utterance is one that is marked by ideas of invitation, demand and response. The invitation to dialogue over issues that are of common concern, is, for Cavell, made without knowing its effects: whether the invitation will be accepted, postponed or rejected, and what the consequences of this might be. The invitation to passionate utterance (with communities or with governments) is one, therefore, that is inherently risky. Indeed, Cavell writes that in the moment of passionate utterance, “I make myself vulnerable to your rebuke” (2005, p. 185), and that each instance of such an utterance “risks, if not costs, blood” (2005, p. 187). This is far from the tendency in universities to manage their (public) communications and to minimise risk. But it is in accepting this risk, in issuing the invitation to dialogue, and in demanding a response, that universities make real their civic claims. This is not about universities *making* trouble in the sense of engaging in political debate solely to disrupt, to privilege certain positions, to exploit their privileged access to powerful bodies to exercise power, or to stifle another’s speech - indeed, Cavell terms these kinds of approaches “political oratory” or “hate speech” (2005, p. 182). It is rather concerned with the troubling - or perhaps the unsettling and disrupting - of ideas, policies, practices or behaviours that threaten the possibilities of our living well and flourishing together. This positions the university in a very different way: not as an institution who, by virtue of having a policy on external relations, demonstrates some kind of commitment to the community, but rather as creator of community - of the *polis*. One very practical way in which this kind of commitment might be expressed is through how the university engages with the public through its research. Research is often done *to* communities, yet less often

with them such that they see the tangible benefits of participation. A richer, and radically more democratic, practice of research would be to situate the community at the heart of research processes: on university ethics committees; funding panels, research teams, and as key participants in the peer review of research outputs.<sup>6</sup> This would not merely be a public relations exercise, but rather a powerful expression of the university's relationship with different communities, and a demonstrable means of amplifying their voices. To speak together in this way – to speak out of passion, as Cavell puts it, we “declare our standing” with each other, that we “stake our future together” (2005, p. 185).

### 4.3. *The University as Personal Troublemaker*

The aims of higher education, and the nature and purpose of universities, seem to resist any final settlement. In recent decades, however, discussions of the future direction of the university sector have coalesced around the skills needs of modern, post-industrial economies. This has then led to a discernible shift in the portfolio offered by universities - with strong direction and support from governments - to service such a need. And with the advent of tuition fees for higher education, students are increasingly choosing to pursue courses of study that have clearly defined routes into particular vocational occupations (Kaye & Bates, 2016). These changes have led to a concern with content, and with the knowledge, skills and attributes that graduates need to acquire in order to be successful in the workplace, or in further study. Propositional knowledge, in terms of 'knowing that', and practical know-how, are central to university courses of study. They are enshrined in lists of indicative content for programmes, and re-stated in learning outcomes. For those courses which attract additional professional accreditation (teaching, accountancy, medicine and the like), professional, statutory and regulatory bodies determine the content of degree programmes that must be taught and assessed. In 2019, for example, England's Department for Education published its *Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework* (DfE, 2019) which lays out a coherent sequence of content for trainee teachers in universities that will allow them to be successful as professionals in the classroom, describing it as a 'minimum entitlement' for all trainee teachers.<sup>7</sup> This focus on the acquisition and securing of propositional knowledge brings to mind Freire's (1970), 'banking' model of education, and the 'pouring in'

6. The inclusion of the community in the practices of academic publishing is seen in the original approach of the *Public Philosophy Journal*, and their strapline 'Scholarship shaped by the public'. They state on their website: 'The Public Philosophy Journal (PPJ) seeks to do philosophy with the public by creating an inclusive space in which community voices are recognized, heard, and supported as vital to the practices of public philosophy. We publish work that has undergone Formative Peer Review—our innovative review process designed to foster collegiality and collaboration'. See: <https://publicphilosophyjournal.org/>

7. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-core-content-framework>

of knowledge which the famous statue of 'Fons Sapientiae' in Leuven, Belgium is often thought to represent.<sup>8</sup>

There is something only partial in this account of the purpose of the university. Let us return at this point to John Williams' novel, *Stoner*. We have already seen how Archer Sloane's classes in English literature troubled and disquieted Stoner. In what follows, I want to suggest that this incident is illustrative of a much broader purpose of higher education as personal troublemaker. As the plot of the novel develops, it becomes apparent that the one lecture that Williams describes in such evocative prose is not to be taken as a passing reference to the kind of life Stoner led as a freshman at the University of Missouri. Rather, Stoner's reaction to the lecture is a moment of transformation. Something was happening to Stoner. As he hurried to his next class (in soil chemistry), he recalled a very different reaction: a feeling of drudgery. But his recollection of the English literature class awakened something in him; it was as if "He became conscious of himself in a way that he had not done before" (p. 13). For Stoner, the university was provocateur; it set him thinking, gave him food for thought. In the sense of the German term, *Denkanstoß*, it was the provoking impulse. But in the idea of the university as provocateur, as personal troublemaker, we should not see provocation to thinking solely as an intellectual exercise, but as the initiation of a transformatory moment. For Stoner, the implications of such a moment were significant. His plans to graduate, and to return to his parents' farm, were profoundly put into question. Reading on a few pages in Williams' novel, we find Stoner meeting Archer Sloane, again this time in his office:

Sloane tapped the folder of papers on his desk. 'I am informed by these records that you come from a farming community. I take it that your parents are farm people?' Stoner nodded.

'And do you intend to return to the farm after you receive your degree here?'

'No sir', Stoner said, and the decisiveness of his voice surprised him. He thought with some wonder of the decision he had suddenly made (Williams, 1965/2012, p. 18).

In this scene, reminiscent of that just a few pages before, Stoner is again at a loss for words. Sloane is reporting to him his grades, and asking him what he is to do if not to return to the farm. Again, Stoner is unable to answer. And it is in this moment that Sloane's words come to him once more to trouble and disquiet him:

'But don't you know, Mr Stoner?', Sloane asked. 'Don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher'

8. See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Fons\\_Sapientiae%22\\_in\\_Leuven.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Fons_Sapientiae%22_in_Leuven.JPG) Inaugurated in 1976, this statue of knowledge may be a representation of student life and it was commissioned in memory of the 550th anniversary of the University of Leuven.

Suddenly Sloane seemed very distant, and the walls of his office receded. Stoner felt himself suspended in the wide air, and he heard his voice ask 'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure' Sloane said softly.

'How can you tell? How can you be sure?'

'It's love, Mr Stoner' Sloane said cheerfully. 'You are in love. It's as simple as that' (Williams 1965/2012, p. 19).

In the remaining pages of the novel, we see the outworkings of these interactions between Stoner and Sloane. Their relationship is never an easy one, but that is not the point. Sloane is the provocateur, setting Stoner thinking and troubling his plans. That such interactions were moments that opened up possibilities for transformation are seen in how Stoner changes his major to English literature; how he carves out for himself an academic career; how he writes on the English Renaissance and studies the classical and medieval Latin influences into that area, and how, on his deathbed, he comes to understand the momentousness of the transformation he had undergone:

There was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been (Williams 1965/2012, p. 288).

To undergo transformation is also to experience some kind of crisis, not in the sense of calamity or catastrophe, but rather (following the etymological roots in the Greek *krisis*), of reaching a turning point, where one must make a decision. Just like the birds in Thoreau's celebrated *Walden* whose moulting season he describes as a 'crisis', our human transformation opens up from points where we are most vulnerable: "Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives" (Thoreau 1854/1999, p. 23). To understand the university as personal troublemaker is to acknowledge its role in opening up spaces of *krisis* for students. This might happen in a number of ways: pedagogically (as we saw with Stoner in Sloane's lecture) or simply in the everyday interactions between students and their lecturers (as we saw in Sloane's subsequent conversation with his student). There is no sense of high drama in either of these examples; no calamitous situation that the idea of crisis might at first suggest. Rather, what is characteristic of the encounters between student and tutor is that there is simply a sense of disorientation that the troublemaking engenders.

This kind of disorientation can be thought of ontologically, as central to thinking about our human condition, but crucially also to ideas of what it means to be educated in the university – to its role as personal troublemaker. What is at stake here is our thinking about the university as place for nurturing a sense of groundlessness or homelessness. This seems paradoxical in a culture within higher education that privileges the securing and demonstration of particular learning outcomes. There is something more radical here than merely encouraging students to recognise the

provisional nature of knowledge in their respective disciplines; it is rather that, as personal troublemaker, the university should be a place of radical unsettling. There are strong connections here to Thoreau's idea, in his famous essay, 'Walking', of sauntering – of being *sans terre* (1862/2006), but also to Heidegger's (1962) idea of *das Unheimliche* – of (perpetually) being not at home. To recognise the university's role as troublemaker is to envisage it as a space for the kind of (troubling) thinking that resists the drive for knowingness; as constituting the space for the disruption of the existing frameworks of our thinking. It is only when we are troubled in this way that, in Thoreau's words, we "come to know how we stand in the...world" (1854/1999, p. 142).

## 5. TROUBLEMAKING IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY

For many who work in it, the university can sometimes seem a troubling place. This kind of trouble is far from the positive agitation of the mind that this paper has been laying out. It is troubling in a different sense of causing a kind of unease that blocks the possibilities for transformation for both students and lecturers. The culture in many institutions that an increasingly highly regulated sector has engendered, leads many to question how to live as academics when there seem to be ever present threats to academic freedom and integrity. In the face of various forms of precarious conditions for academics, is it still meaningful to talk of spaces for dissent, and what sorts of vulnerabilities are exposed through such dissent?

In 2013, Gary Rolfe outlined a response to the 'ruined university'. The academy, he claimed, was in peril because of the strength of discourses such as the knowledge economy and the idea of the University of Excellence. For Rolfe, such discourses have left the university "bereft of any critical regulating function and has allowed the administrators and bureaucrats to bring about its corporatization, and hence its ruination, in the name of excellence and efficiency" (2013, p. 34). What hope is there, then, given this state of affairs? Rather than talking about redemption or rebuilding the academy from the ruins, Rolfe adopts the Heideggerian idea of dwelling with what is present. He writes of an idea of a "university within the University" -referring to a "*Paraversity* which runs unseen or unnoticed alongside, and in parallel with, the University of Excellence" (2013, p. 35), and which occupies "a virtual space where dissensus might occur" (*ibid.*).

Rolfe's concept of the *Paraversity* is problematic in a number of ways. First, he unabashedly describes the *Paraversity* as "an underground...network" (p. 44). This is suggestive of a kind of invisibility, and of, in Rolfe's words, organic, unnoticed and non-hierarchical groups, working counter to the existing institution. Indeed, he claims that "To those working outside of it, the paraversity would be all but invisible...[with] no overt outward signs of its existence" (pp. 44-45). Such ideas 'other' the university, forcing a deeply unhelpful separation that closes off possibilities

for dialogue. There are lines of connection here with the thought of the French existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, when he writes of what is at stake in our availability (*disponibilité*) to an other. In the context of the idea of the paraversity, where we are rendered invisible to those who are other to us, we might consider Marcel's question:

What is relevant, rather, is the act by which I expose myself to the other person instead of protecting myself from him, which makes him penetrable for me at the same time as I become penetrable for him (Marcel, 1964, p. 36).

Second, Rolfe's idea of the *Paraversity* does not seek to change the University of Excellence *per se*; rather, in taking radical critique underground, it allows the university (in ruins or otherwise) to remain. This does little to realise the idea of *universitas* as a community of masters and scholars. As a community - and drawing on the etymology in the Latin *com-munus* (where *munus* signifies the burden that we share), we get the sense of community as realised in the challenge of living with others who may be radically different to us.

Yet against the background of calamitous accounts of the contemporary university, there is hope. This does not lie in vacuous promises of wholesale cultural change in the sector, nor in a return to some bygone golden age of the academy (were there ever such an era), or even in underground movements that seek to subvert dominant policy and regulatory discourses, however repugnant these might be. Hope for transformation through forms of pedagogical, political and personal troublemaking, lies instead in being *universitas*; in being with each other as a community of masters and scholars. There is nothing exceptional in this; it is concerned with the most ordinary of conversations between students and lecturers that have powerful perlocutionary effects. Williams' *Stoner* shows us this. The novel's protagonist, the young freshman, is troubled and disquieted by the very routine questions posed at the end of a lecture. The whole trajectory of his (academic) life is shifted by an unremarkable conversation about his plans post-graduation, which has extraordinary effects. It is this same routineness of conversation that marks Cavell's idea of passionate utterance. He used the following as examples: "I'm bored", and from Bizet's opera, *Carmen*, Don José's words, "Carmen, I love you". But in these words, despite their seeming ordinariness, is the invitation, and demand for a response that is at once perfectly reasonable for the context, and yet in its force, profoundly troubling.

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