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The Beast in the Jungle: the Humanities in the Future Higher Education Landscape

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Abstract

That universities—existing and to-be-invented—will by necessity be more entrepreneurial in the future is enshrined in higher education policy in Ireland and, indeed, has been seemingly uncritically accepted by higher education institutions, old and new. Commercializing research output, nurturing spin-out commercial activity, embracing on-campus private, commercial companies, forming entrepreneurial graduates with entrepreneurial training embedded in the curriculum—all these strategies are encouraged, if not required, of a new higher education culture that promises, in adopting these strategies, a pathway towards "economic renewal". An industry- and business-led vision of the future of higher education sits uneasily with faculty in Humanities, however, where a linear correlation between the curriculum, research activity and commercial, economic benefit is not always easy to see, if it exists at all. Moreover, the principles on which the entrepreneurial university is build sit uneasily with the conception of the university favoured by Humanities: clearly a utilitarian conception of education finds little space for art, poetry, history, metaphysics and other disciplines that perhaps until recently have not needed to justify their existence within the academy nor the expenditure of resources in their support. This paper will seek to critique current higher education policy from the Humanities perspective (thus resisting, to a degree, the notion of the entrepreneurial university), and will offer some ways of thinking about transformed universities that are informed by principles other than those promoted by policy. The paper will examine some of the consequences for the configuration of higher education in Ireland into the future if these alternative principles are embraced. These reflections emerge from Waterford Institute of Technology's efforts to create a Technological University in the South-east of Ireland and some consideration will be made of the experience to date of seeking to invent a new kind of higher education body in the light of higher education policy.

I

Polemic is hard to resist when it comes to a consideration of the future landscape of higher education in Ireland. One recalls, for its tone and its sentiments—and as a measure both of how far we have come and how little has changed in the last one hundred years—Padraic Pearse's fearsome "The Murder Machine" where he proposes that the Irish education system has been "designed by our masters in order to make us willing or at least manageable slaves" with schools, colleges and universities as "the symbol of [Ireland's] penal servitude", "the broad-arrow upon the back of Ireland" (pp. 6-7). He is not only referring to the education system imposed on Ireland by the English as part of the colonial apparatus but to the larger relationship between education and the State. "The modern child," writes Pearse,

is coming to regard his teacher as an official paid by the State to render him certain services; services which it is in his interest to avail of, since by doing so he will increase his earning capacity later on; but services the rendering and acceptance of which no more imply a sacred relationship than do the rendering and acceptance of the services of a dentist or a chiropodist. (p.14)

There seems today to be amongst universities, Institutes of Technology and colleges, widespread acceptance of some of the assumptions of recent

developments in Irish higher education strategy, particularly with regard to the relationship between education, industrial and commercial interests and the neo-liberal State. Nowadays, the political ideology of the State reflects that of commerce and finds expression in the prioritisation in higher education of certain disciplines, managerialist approaches to institutional organisation, and a certain orientation towards research. Though clearly writing from a different time, with different priorities, this would not be unfamiliar to Pearse; the complicity visible in higher education policy and practice is far from a "sacred relationship", to use Pearse's term, but rather, through "the application of neo-liberal economic principles and associated managerial practices", current strategy reflects a "commodification" of knowledge and a re-shaping of higher education's value system (Grenfell p.103). Pearse's politics in part directed his rage, of course, but his commitment to essentially liberal education also compelled him to speak against the "educational machinery" (p.17). One hundred years on, the lack of critique is alarming, the seeming acquiescence and calm acceptance of a particular relationship between commerce, education and the State depressing. Rightly we think of higher education in crisis.

Today's higher education machinery is an uncomfortable place for those embedded in disciplines in Arts and Humanities, disciplines whose seeming utilitarian value and contribution to the "smart economy" is close to if not actually zero. Here I mean literary studies, music, history, minority languages, classics, and others. Valiant efforts to ensure the inclusion of Humanities traditionally understood within higher education institutions suggest a community of disciplines and scholars under siege, fervently resisting the turning of the cogs and sometimes, like the Little Tramp in Chaplin's film masterpiece *Modern Times*, being ground between the machine's teeth. In some cases, Humanities has retreated behind the "generic skills" barrier, proposing, as a last-ditch effort at self-justification, that Humanities subjects teach students such skills as critical thinking, independence, team work and the like, all valuable of course within the knowledge economy. So, the *Report of the Innovation Taskforce* declares that "STEM disciplines are complemented by the arts, humanities and social sciences", disciplines that help individuals "develop a wide range of skills beyond specific qualifications", such as "critical and analytical thinking, cultural awareness, communication and broader perspectives", skills "much sought after by employers in innovative industries and businesses for their contribution to a more flexible and multi-skilled person." Moreover, amongst other things,

These [Arts, Humanities and Social Science] disciplines can translate science to the wider public while visual art and design research can make complex information more understandable. Research in law underpins the efficiency of Intellectual Property in incentivising and rewarding innovation while modern languages play an obvious role in driving international trade and cross-cultural collaboration. These disciplines also have a unique contribution to make to certain sectors of the economy including services and what are broadly described as the creative and cultural industries. (pp.31-2)

The generic skills defence and the proposition that Humanities subjects can

exist "in service" to more important STEM areas are typical of the strategies deployed by Humanities to resist the irrevocable tide that sees "the very existence of many humanities disciplines [...] put in peril" and humanities staff, by and large, "disempowered and demoralised by the effects of widespread unregulated preferment and untrammelled philistinism" (Breathnach p.403). In many cases, one senses extraordinary frustration and anger, marginalisation, and often a desperate feeling of a battle about to be or actually lost.

In the Institute of Technology sector, in particular, the question of the future of Humanities has come into sharp focus. In part this has been informed by the introduction of a new category of higher education institution—the Technological University—to the Irish system. Introduced it is clear to solve long-standing problems arising from the increasing resemblance (in terms of scale, breadth of disciplinary activity and research profile) of some Institutes of Technology to universities, the Technological University is a means to consolidate (for which read, "rationalise") existing higher education provision (principally across the Institute of Technology sector) and—reacting to seeming "mission drift" of some Institute of Technology over a number of decades—to ensure the continued diversity of higher education institutions nationally. In other words, the Technological University label has been seen as an exercise in arresting the growth of Humanities in the Institutes of Technology with a view to reorienting these institutions towards different, perhaps more commercially-driven ends. The very title of the institution, the inclusion of the word "Technological", is off-putting for Humanities. And many of the prescribed features of the Technological University are uncongenial to those in Humanities disciplines: the insistence on programmes of study that are "vocationally/professionally oriented, with a strong focus on science and technology" and that support research "primarily focused on applied, problem oriented research and discovery, with effective knowledge transfer alongside the provision of consulting/problem solving services" seem exclusive of the traditions and culture of Arts and Humanities in particular (see "Towards the Future Higher Education Landscape", p.14).

"We will use research funding [...] to instil a commercialisation culture in third-level institutions," declares *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* (p.76). The imperative to create such a culture, however, and to work more closely with business and enterprise is not the only requirement of higher education institutions. As Davies notes, "Reductions in public financial support for universities [...] create an imperative for new and diversified financial sources" (p.27). Institutions are increasingly required to be entrepreneurial to raise funds and, in fact, some—many—have come to identify their entrepreneurial dimension as their defining feature. (Dublin City University, for instance, has nominated itself as "the University of Enterprise".) Such designation clearly makes explicit the relationship between the university and commerce and the "commercialisation culture" existing within such institutions is arguably even less welcoming of literature, theatre, music, languages. The gradual erosion of State financial support for universities and the strong demand that universities become more entrepreneurial suggests an inexorable drive towards the convergence of commerce and the university. In this context, the Technological University is primed to be the test case in Ireland for a new

generation of higher education provision. It is a matter of great debate, and concern, where Humanities might feature, if at all, within such "machinery".

II

Pearse's machine metaphor is of its time, as is Charlie Chaplin's similar representation of the pressures of modernity. In abundance in higher education policy literature in Ireland nowadays are spatial, geographical and cartographical means of describing current activity and future plans. Thus we have the higher education "landscape", student "pathways", future "directions", a research "roadmap". Defences of Humanities indeed have used these metaphors themselves: a profile of Humanities and Social Science research, *Creating Ireland*, describes itself as "an effort to map the landscape of humanities and social sciences research [...] to highlight the key issues and developments that might inform its future direction" (p.13). Such metaphors arguably give what are often abstract policy a clarity it does not otherwise possess; perhaps one should not be too suspicious of this standard rhetorical device. At the same time, however, the deployment of these metaphors can be seen an exercise in control. In the same way that performance indicators "are underpinned by specific interests and value orientations", their "appeal to 'objectivity' and commonsensical reasonableness" giving them an "ideological power to enchant" (Loxley pp.126-7), so the use of spatial means to describe higher education is far from "innocent".

Thomas Docherty offers a compelling analysis of the use of spatial metaphors in higher education strategy, arguing that the description of research (but also other activities conducted by universities) in spatial terms is reductive and betrays an ideological perspective at variance with what research is all about. He aligns the State's efforts to direct universities in their research effort to similar direction in terms of their use of "plant", the requirement being for the efficient utilisation of the university's spaces. It is noteworthy that the *National Strategy for Higher Education* endorses the HEA recommendation that "consideration be given to an increase in the academic operational year or day/week/semester with a view to increasing the efficiency of space usage in the sector" (p.120). Docherty writes:

The wayward drive toward the cost-efficient exploitation of space offers, in many ways, a perfect description of the misdirected pressure that governments in the advanced economies have placed upon University research [...] Space, as a commodity, is itself to be exploited; and its exploitation will lead to further manipulations of space that will encourage further exploitation of the resources of the planet we call home. Behind this is an ideological drive in which citizens will start to "know their proper place", as it were; and, in this, I mean to hint that there is a tacit political and ideological drive here, and one that is meant to "contain" (if I can pursue the spatial metaphor) the potential or latent demands of the human subject and spirit for edification and expansion of consciousness into unforeseen modes of thought. (p.73)

The rhetoric of "landscape" and "pathway" and "future direction" hides, if one accepts this analysis, a disabling ideology that consigns individual institutions

and, indeed, the wider citizenry to a "contained" state to be regulated, managed, and ultimately exploited. Clearly the suggestion here is that such commodification of education is in the best interests of commerce, not necessarily of citizens.

The regional remit of the new Technological Universities is explicit in the guidance offered by the HEA on the new institution and serves merely further to formalise thinking about higher education in spatial terms. In fact, assigning region-based roles to the new Technological Universities merely offers direct literal expression of an understanding based on figuration—the Technological Universities become impositions on the physical regional landscape and with a range of activities that will have tangible impact on regional economies. Docherty again:

Regionalization, in which the University's research is "applied" to the economic requirements and identity of a specific [geographical] region, is a form of parochialism that we might now identify either as the triumph of the *espirit de géométrie* or as the improper restraint upon research by an improperly overweening ideological government [...] In either case, research—as blue-skies expansiveness and edification—is endangered. (p.92)

In other words, the requirement that Technological Universities have "particular regard to the needs of the region in which the university is located" ("Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape", p.14) is an expression of a regulating State attempting to contain, ultimately, its citizens and, in particular, to restrict and determine the activities of academics.

The Institutes of Technology, of course, had an existence originally as Regional Technical Colleges, their regional remit enshrined not just in their name but in their governing legislation, carried over furthermore into their latest incarnation as Institutes of Technology. They have always functioned as contained institutions, therefore, and the requirement that in any transformation to a new entity that they continue to direct their attention to "the region in which they are located" suggests a continued containment. The Institutes have become badges of local achievement, at the same time, and their development has been seen as essential for the development of local economies. Not least this is because of the significant local economic and social impact of the Institute by the mere fact of its population and power as an employer. Of arguably greater power, however, is the "status" conferred locally by the presence and development of an Institute into a university. The experience in Waterford regarding its long-running "campaign" for university "status" (the words are not mine) suggests a visceral , certainly emotional link between the nature of the educational institution in existence locally and how citizens feel about their city and wider region. The lack of a university in Waterford is frequently interpreted by commentators locally as yet another example of the city's (and its inhabitants') exclusion and marginalisation. The discourse surrounding WIT's university "campaign" suggests it is a matter of "justice".

Neoliberalism, according to David Harvey, has "created new systems of governance that integrate state and corporate interests, and through the

application of money power, it has ensured that the disbursement of the surplus through the state apparatus favours corporate capital and the upper classes in shaping the urban process" (p.38). He is writing of the relationship between the State and corporate interests in directing urbanization but much of what Harvey says is transferable to the domain of higher education—particularly when one considers that his analysis is of the corporate takeover, with the complicity of the State, of particular kinds of space. Harvey's interest is in securing a renewed ability on the part of citizens to exercise their "right to the city" for, he suggests, "The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is [...] one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights" (p.23). It is not entirely fanciful to suggest that, in addition to this right, the right for citizens to "make and remake" higher education is a similar right, precious and neglected. The denial of this right—in the form of State direction of individual institutional strategy—is arguably now the case.

Higher education institutions feature in public discourse in interesting ways that betray the relationship between those institutions and citizens. In the case of some Institutes of Technology, the institution's "status" has wider consequences within public perception. Certainly higher education institutions—particularly universities—are positioned within public discourse in a manner that differentiates them from other kinds of social agent. It is true to say that the public's engagement with higher education in Ireland has, by and large, been limited by a discourses of exclusivity, with, for instance, entry to these institutions "policed" by a largely anonymous, seemingly opaque, largely mathematical process directed by the Central Applications Office (itself a largely invisible organisation despite its seeming power). In some ways, the containment strategies of the State and the insistence on higher education institutions succumbing to "hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics" (Harvey p.23) further contributes to that discourse of exclusion. Notwithstanding the real physical presence of higher education institutions in cities and towns across the country, citizens may be distanced from, even disempowered by these institutions by their seemingly uncritical embrace of the dominant ideology.

III

One can read the containment strategies of the State as expressed in higher education policy as ultimately attempts to restrict individual and institutional autonomy, whether that is in directing institutions towards the service of commercial interests, or limiting the range of disciplines within an institution, or confining an institution to an explicitly regional remit. Autonomy is a characteristic feature—a necessary feature—of the university; attempts to restrict that autonomy challenge the very fabric of the university as an institution. In one sense, then, the future "landscape" of higher education in Ireland promises the destruction of any traditional understanding of the university, replacing it with a very different kind of institution, more closely embedded with enterprise and, crucially, an arm of the State, contained and managed and a vehicle for the wider promotion and action of State policy. On the other hand, the opportunity exists to create a new kind of higher education institution in Ireland, via the Technological University, the features of which,

while described in general terms in "Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape", remain largely undefined (see pp.14ff). In some senses the notion of the Technological University is still in play and the prospect of offering into Irish higher education a new kind of institution remains. The idea of innovation is a pillar around which such a university can be defined. Specifically, the new university as at the centre of an innovation ecosystem offers an opportunity for thinking of universities in a new manner. In some ways "innovation" has been purloined as a term in service to Harvey's "hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics". I suggest here a reclamation of "innovation" that links the term more closely to democratic practice.

Conventional understandings of innovation consider it as referring to new ideas that translate into beneficial activities, specifically into different business activities or services, a tool that may be exploited by entrepreneurs (see Boult et al pp.168-9). For my purposes, I wish to emphasise the transformative and disruptive nature of innovation—innovation literally means "making new" (L. *novare*, "make new"). In placing innovation at the centre of any new university, in effect one conceives of this new higher education institution as a disruptive force—as cultivating and promoting disruption, for the purposes of cultivating and promoting innovation.

One expression of such disruption would be the counter-cultural promotion of certain kinds of research. The idea of the university as part of an "innovation ecosystem" has been well elaborated elsewhere (see O'Gorman and Donnelly) and involves a particular way for universities, businesses and State agents to interact for developmental purposes. Crucial for our purposes is its expression in spatial terms; it is (as O'Gorman and Donnelly have it) an "innovation space" that is uncontained, without boundary, that operates through the interaction of two economies, "the research economy [which] is driven by fundamental research, [and] the commercial economy [which] is driven by the needs of the marketplace" (O'Gorman and Donnelly). In other words, the innovation ecosystem, while describing a form of interaction between businesses, universities and other public bodies, with commercial outputs, ultimately involves free inquiry that is entirely independent of those other entities—this in the form of fundamental research, essential within any university (but excluded, notably, from indicative descriptions of the Technological University by the HEA). At the heart of innovation, and at the heart of any innovation "ecosystem", lies a notion of new knowledge that can only come about through fundamental research, research freed from the requirement of practical application. As such, this new knowledge carries with it disruptive power—both in its newness and, importantly, in its blindness to practicality and commercial exploitation. Of course Arts and Humanities research may be characterised in this way.

The practice of fundamental research is of course an expression of institutional freedom; the disruptive force of the university is fundamentally related to its confidence in expressing its autonomy. Barnett usefully links autonomy with truth-telling (which should be at the core of the university), which in turn he associates with a strong sense of commitment—university students "are required to give of themselves, to produce their own autonomy"

in the course of their education (pp.53ff). In this sense, universities are not training camps for democrats in which submission to the curriculum ensures the successful transformation of individuals into citizens: Biesta refers to this notion as that of the "citizen-as-outcome" in which democratic citizenship is conceived "as a status that is only achieved *after* one has traversed a particular developmental and educational trajectory" (p.172). More compelling are notions of democracy as a kind of performance—Jane McDonnell reflects on Rancière's use of theatrical metaphors to an understanding of democracy where the democratic process "is a process of perpetual bringing into play, of invention of forms of subjectivity" (Rancière qtd in McDonnell 50). Within free universities, students "perform" their own autonomy and, in this sense, practice democracy. Biesta states this in a different way, arguing for the importance (with reference to Hannah Arendt) of action to human existence, action meaning "to take initiative, to begin something new, to bring something new into the world" (p.176). Democracy is characterised, for Biesta, as "the situation in which it is possible for everyone to act, for everyone to bring their beginnings and thus themselves into the world" (p.177). The free university— what one might call the "innovation university"—is one where individuals' selves are permitted to act and be brought freely into the world.

Empirically this can find expression in the nature and configuration of the curriculum; it might be argued that the formation of future innovators is best achieved by a curriculum that disrupts certainty and foregrounds newness, so that the learning encounters of the student (and indeed the teacher) are encounters always with the new not necessarily the known. Certainly the innovation university will necessarily preserve a range of disciplines and sustain research and teaching activity across a range of disciplines. In part this is to cultivate –indeed insist on—interdisciplinary inquiry. As Barnett suggests, "Manufactured epistemological turmoil", such as might be generated within an innovation-centred institution, "will be a sign of the university realizing itself"; in creating "novel juxtapositions of its discourses", the university will be engaged in "creating new knowledge" (p.105). There is a necessary place for Arts and Humanities within the innovation space. In fact, the innovation space cannot be so without Arts and Humanities.

McDonnell notes the important ways in which, in some radical political philosophy, art can be an important and necessary disruptive force in society, whether that be because it "allows for the kind of disruptive, disincorporating process of political subjectification through which democracy occurs" (drawing on Rancière) or "by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities" (drawing on Mouffe) (p.51). Art practice certainly may be seen as having disruptive—and therefore innovation— potential and might form a key part of the curriculum in the innovation university. So also might the study of art (and music, poetry, dance) as various "enactments of democratic subjectivity". The lyric poem, in other words, as the free expression of an historical individual writing without constraint may be seen as a more compelling instruction manual for innovation than any handbook of entrepreneurism. It is so not just as an example of subjectivity. Furthermore, it is in the nature of the experience of the lyric poem that its true innovation resides; the experience of the poem is

an experience of disruption. One is reminded of Keats's famous idea of "Negative Capability", "that is, when a man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 68). The literary experience, and the experience of music, dance, theatre—these experiences all involve a certain amount of "being in uncertainty" that would seem to be at the heart both of innovation and democratic practice.

In Henry James's famous story, "The Beast in the Jungle", a man has a sinking feeling all his life that something is going to happen to him that will change everything, that will determine and define his life in ways he does not know, and so he waits, all his life, in anticipation. At the end of the story, "He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast" and it was this: "all the while he had waited the wait itself was his portion" (pp.106-7). I wish to emphasise the aesthetic dimension to innovation, the notion that innovation is a matter of style as much as anything else. An innovation university will be aesthetically, stylistically different than any other—a "beast in the jungle" in some ways. I began with the notion of style, indeed, by highlighting the polemical register of this current appeal. The attempt has been to create an intervention that will describe but also enact a kind of disruption on which any new university could begin to be built.

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