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CHAPTER 3
THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY AND ITS CULTURED DESPISERS

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Caroline Bingley: I should like balls infinitely better...if they were carried on in a different manner....It would be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day.

Charles Bingley: Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say, but it would not be near so much like a ball.

—Jane Austen

Introduction

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there were no universities. You could travel wherever your fancy took you and stumble upon kings and courts, soldiers, churches (some with little schools attached), towns, merchants, farmers, in fact, all manner of things—but no universities. Then, in a very short period of time and in different places—Paris, Bologna, Oxford—and no one knows quite how or why, the university appeared; chaotically, anarchically, without any grand plan or design, with its subsequent organisation by authorities merely tidying up a pre-existing emergent order (see Knowles 1962).

If there was a time at which universities did not exist; there may come a time when they cease to exist. The unimaginable is only unimaginable because of the limits of our imagination. I know of no law which states that the world as we know it would come to a crashing halt if universities were to disappear. Like many other things in our mutable world, the university is
radically contingent, its apparent solidity being just that, apparent. Institutions are essentially functional entities. If they cease to perform the function they emerged to serve then they either cease to exist, exist as a kind of mummified relic (as do many churches in Europe) or find another function to serve (as constitutional monarchs have done).

The University and the State

The university is the second-oldest surviving institution in the Western world. Only the Catholic Church is of greater longevity. The university predates most of the forces that today seek to control, re-model or, in extreme cases, to re-engineer it, in particular, the modern state which traces its origin back to the Peace of Westphalia. An institution of such an age can only exist if, throughout its long life, it answered and continues to answer some need or set of needs in the changing social and political circumstances in which it exists. And it can answer changing needs only if it itself adaptable. Such linkage as the university has had with the State has been historically contingent and was not and is not in any way necessary to its being or its operation; and while such association may have been of material assistance to the university, it has also carried a cost—the shrinking, sometimes to the point of invisibility, of the university’s autonomy and the imperilling of its function.

Over the centuries since universities began, several different models have emerged: the Newmanian University which prioritises the educational experience of the student, the Humboldt University which places research at the university’s core, and that strange, peculiarly contemporary institution that has been called by Clark Kerr, the Multiversity (Kerr 2001), whose essence, like that of the Sartrean man, is apparently to have no essence. This Multiversity is not “based upon a clear and identifiable historical ‘idea’. It [is] rather a collection of ideas competing with one another. It [is] messy and chaotic” (Rothblatt 2006, p. 26). From the British model to the German model to the model of the new, entrepreneurial university (or
multiversity) whose job it is to “seek research contracts from industrial, pharmaceutical and military concerns, and encourage their members to act as consultants to outside business” (Thomas 2010, p. 14). The multiversity is comprised of “a pluralist amalgam of different functions, serving different constituencies and lacking any single purpose” (Thomas 2010, p. 14). The forms of government appropriate to either the English or German model, it would appear, are no longer suitable to the new multiversity. The multiversity is to be governed (or, rather, managed) by a “managerial class, led by vice-chancellors” who see themselves as “thrusting business executives rather than self-effacing ancillaries” and who pay themselves accordingly, “typically three or four times as much as a professor” (Thomas 2010, p. 14).

There are ever increasing demands on universities: more and more students, more and more courses or modules (especially if they are ‘relevant’) together with either the same or declining numbers of academic staff and diminishing financial resources.

Knowledge-based enterprises in the economy and society create an expanding and rapidly changing professional labour market for which universities are expected to provide competent graduates. Governments expect universities to do much more for society in solving economic and social problems, but at the same time they back and fill in their financial support and become unreliable patrons. “Pushed and pulled by enlarging, interacting streams of demand, universities are pressured to change their curricula, alter their faculties, and modernize their increasingly expensive physical plant and equipment—and to do so more rapidly than ever. Some more traditional fields of study are bypassed, others fall into disarray. With the humanities now highly vulnerable, critics contend that universities do not know where they are going, even that they have lost their souls (Clark 2007, pp. xiii-xiv).

Other commentators broadly agree with Kerr. Slaughter and Leslie claim that “the structure of academic work is changing in response to the emergence of global markets” and
that “...the globalization of the political economy at the end of the twentieth century is destabilizing patterns of university professional work developed over the past hundred years” (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, p. 209). All that being said, there is nothing inherently unreasonable in requiring that universities make some contribution to society at large. That is what universities have always done and, as long as they persist, it is what they will continue to do. Universities, from their very beginning, have not only had a broad general education remit but have had a vocational element, originally in the fields of law, medicine or theology, later in engineering and technology. The earliest universities were closely tied to the rational exploration of Christianity. Within a short space of time, the dynamic political structure of Europe required a functioning bureaucracy and the university (for example, the University of Naples and the University of Bologna) began to serve the function of producing an educated and well-trained proto-civil service. The English idea of the university took as its principal purpose the provision of the appropriate kind of educational training of an intellectual and social elite, in its decadent phase concentrating almost entirely on the social side. On this model, the advancement of learning through research could scarcely be a primary function of the university and, indeed, the principal intellectual advances in Britain tended to be made for the most part outside the influence of the universities. The German, or Humboldt model, by contrast, placed a premium on the notion of original research. The influence of this model spread widely from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century so that by the start of the twentieth century, even English universities were expected to engage in scholarship and to advance knowledge as well as to train young minds in a largely non-vocational way. The history of the university, then, is the history of a dynamic institution which has had among its goals the advancement of the Christian religion, the education of a governing elite, the advancement of knowledge and, now, the provision of mass education for citizens of democracies. Where next?
How much change can an institution undergo and still remain essentially the same? Not all change is mere development; some change is transformative so that the outer shell of social institutions remain the same while their interiors are extensively, even radically, remodelled. For example, Augustus and his imperial successors maintained the republican forms of Rome for hundreds of years after Rome had effectively been transformed into an empire. Is the modern university a hollow-shell, capable of being internally colonised by some new and transfigurative set of purposes? Is the multiversity a university? In particular, has the ever-increasing entanglement of state and university via funding and explicit control changed the fundamental nature of the university?

It is possible to overstate the case and to draw the contrasts between the past and the present too starkly. We must beware of romanticising the past and thinking that we have declined from some patrician past into a plebeian present. Gordon Graham writes: “There is to my mind a dangerous romanticism in thinking that once upon a time British universities were suitably Newmanesque until the arrival of utilitarian Philistines....” (Graham 2002, p. 2). Universities, at least those in Great Britain and Ireland, have always had a relation to the state and have always, to some extent, been under its control. What is new, however, is the almost total reliance of universities on government funding. One very unwelcome result of this funding reliance has been an increasing micro-control by the state and its agencies of universities and their activities. In the UK, the Higher Education Funding Council introduced funding initiatives, then the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Graham remarks that, willy nilly, the universities “had been forged into a state ‘system’ largely paid for by the state and subject to extensive central control” (Graham 2002, p. 14).

He who pays the piper calls the tune and increasing the state has been telling the universities what tune to play. There is no absolute necessity for universities to be state funded. They originated without state funding and have operated without state funding for most of their history. There are a number of
possibilities. We can have: either no state funding and no state control; or state funding and state control; or declining and/or inadequate state funding and increasing state control. Of these, the latter is the least satisfactory option and it is the option we increasingly have. Slaughter and Leslie write “If the state share of public university funding continues to decline, at some point the universities will become de facto independent or private, if they are not already” (Slaughter & Leslie 1997, p. 239). This judgement may be too sanguine as the state appears to be unwilling to relinquish the control it has acquired through funding even when the funding is declining. In the words of the bumper sticker, universities have become accustomed to doing so much with so little for so long that soon they will be required to do everything with nothing—still under government control. Government interference reaches into the very heart of the university. Under funding pressure from government, universities are persuaded to change their curricula, close what are deemed to be irrelevant subject areas (even, in some cases, core but expensive subject areas such as chemistry), develop closer links with business and commerce and become ever more relevant. This being so, you would think there is every reason for universities to get out from under the increasingly intrusive hand of the state and to recover some sense of what it is that they are supposed to be. “Universities then need greater self-consciousness on where they draw the line between what they are willing to do and not do to meet these demands” (Kerr 2001, p. 140).

Just as state dependence has been bad for the Christian Churches in the past, so too is it bad for the university. But if universities are not funded by the state, where will they derive their income from? The answer is reasonably obvious and it is a mystery as to why it should be thought obscure. Those who provide goods and services normally derive their income from those to whom the goods and services are provided or from those willing to subsidise such beneficiaries. The university is a service provider and so its funding will have to be raised from those who benefit directly from the university’s core activities;
the students who are taught and those who are willing to fund or to pay for the university’s research. There is nothing revolutionary about this sentiment. It is not so very long ago that much of the cost of university education fell in whole or in large part on students or on their parents. Then free university education was instituted as part of a programme of universal access in which tax revenue was used to provide benefits to some at a cost to others; “free” doesn’t really mean free, it simply means that someone other than the immediate beneficiary pays for it. The ‘free fees’ regime in Ireland introduced by a Labour minister in the 1990s is a case in point. It was intended to facilitate access to the universities by previously under-represented groups (‘under-represented’ being code for ‘working-class’ or ‘poor’) but instead of being targeted to the social groups deemed to be excluded from university by financial considerations it was made a general entitlement. Furthermore, it neglected to address the more fundamental problems limiting the access of those groups, namely, a paucity of social capital and deficiencies in second level education. Not only did it not achieve its stated aim of improving the number of students from poor backgrounds at university, it removed a source of independent funding from the university and tied the university hand and foot to government funding. From a financial perspective, this might have been all well and good in times of plentiful tax revenues (though even then the level of funding was not particularly generous) but in times of fiscal austerity, the results have been productive of cutbacks and staff shortages.

Graham notes that using “substantial amounts of tax revenue to support [higher education] can mean, and in practice often does mean, that the preferences and choices of some are being paid for at the expense of others, and that the relatively rich are being subsidised by the relatively poor” (Graham 2002, p. 110). Whatever about the ideological aspects of the aspiration of universal access, financially it was possible only when the cohort of the population attending university was relatively small. “The fact that tax revenues are necessarily limited means
no government can support a system of funding, whether of health, social security, defence, legal aid or education, which requires virtually unlimited expenditure” (Graham 2002, p. 102). The situation is now changing in the UK where universities have recently been given permission to charge fees that bear some real relation to actual costs. In Ireland, we delude ourselves that university education is still free to all, ignoring the fact that the rapidly escalating Registration Charge is a fee by another name; a totally inadequate fee but a fee nonetheless.

There are other costs that are borne by those attending university even if they don’t have to meet the direct expenditure required, namely the opportunity cost of the time spent at the university that could have been put to use in remunerative employment elsewhere. In the past, this opportunity cost was thought to be compensated for by the higher earnings that would eventually accrue to the graduate but this is no longer the case and hasn’t been for quite some time. A degree is worth very little as a distinguishing factor on the job market now that virtually half to two thirds of the population has one. For those who advocate a university education primarily as a means to career advancement, the rapidly declining “job-value” of the first degree should cause them to reconsider the wisdom of advocating a policy of tax-funded universal access. Peter Thiel, co-founder of Pay Pal, caused a bit of a storm in May 2011 when he offered twenty fellowships of $100,000 each to students to pursue innovative scientific and technical projects, learn entrepreneurship, and start to build the technology companies of the future. The proviso is that the recipients of these fellowships have to stay out of college (see National Public Radio 2011).

There are those who would fear that the independence of the university would be compromised if it were to become dependent on fee-paying students. Whatever dangers fee-paying students might represent to the autonomy of the university, it couldn’t conceivably be more destructive that the danger represented by a government motivated by ideological and financial considerations. “The government middleman........
threatens academic, and more importantly intellectual independence far more than the fee bearing student would do” (Graham 2002, p. 117). As the writer of an article in The Economist pointed out some years ago, in a fee-paying culture, the university would be beholden to nobody and it would decrease or eliminate dependence on government funding, thereby promoting genuine university autonomy. It would also, incidentally, increase student motivation. A dependable fee income would free universities from domination by government and government agencies and would require universities to provide an education that meets the requirements of value as determined by those individuals who stand to benefit from its services.

As it happens, not only are some (but not all) private universities surviving, new ones are emerging, driven primarily by market considerations. One of the largest of these, the University of Phoenix, has 280,000 students concentrating largely on business and technology subjects. As well as the University of Phoenix, we have Strayer University, Concord Law School and Cardean University. These all make extensive use of the internet. The emergence of these universities is happening at a time when the state is increasingly disengaging, at least financially, from the university so that we might describe the disengagement process, as one university president is alleged to have done, as a shift from the university as state institution, to state-supported institution, to state-assisted institution, to state-located institution, to state-annoyed institution.

When it comes right down to it, then, there are two and only two ways to get the funds to run a university: either get your money from fees, donations, investments, and so on, or get your money from the government, which is to say, from the taxpayer. Be self-financed and determine your own fate, or be state-financed and state-run.

State funding carries a lot of extra baggage with it. Universities are expected to do things that are not explicitly their business. Apart from the requirement to educate (or at least to
certify) increasing numbers of students, social engineering comes high on the government’s priorities.

Universities can indeed give the disadvantaged a leg-up—but they will do it much better if the state stands back. Micro-managing university admissions, as the British government has been trying to do on grounds of class, with targets, quotas, fines and strictures, risks the same consequences as similar American experiences based on racial preference. It humiliates the talented but disadvantaged, whose success is then devalued; it infuriates the talented who are not deemed under-privileged enough and who feel their merits ignored, and it makes universities do a job they are bound to do badly (Anon. 2004, p. 11).

The problem with so-called under-representation of some social groups is best addressed elsewhere, in improving the quality of second-level schooling or in addressing the question of the destruction of social capital cause, in large part, by state interference in familial structures.

The universities, nominally private, are in fact controlled by the state with a life threatening stranglehold. As MacCabe puts it, “The government is the problem. Its laudable desire to increase, for economic reasons, the number of students attending university; to increase, for social reason, the number of students from poorer homes at university; and to make sure that the government is getting value for money, all turn out, on examination, to be either misguided in themselves or actively counter-productive” (MacCabe 2005).

There are other assumptions about the state’s promotion of university education that must be questioned. One of these is “the utilitarian notion that universities’ main merit is their economic usefulness. Amid much blather about the ‘knowledge economy’, the core of this belief is that more higher education means higher productivity and more wealth” (Anon. 2004). This presupposition is deeply flawed as a causal connection between
a prosperous economy and a university system catering to a large section of the population has yet to be scientifically established.

In a way, the matter of state support of the university systems in the UK and Ireland has already been decided. The present rate of rapidly reducing levels of state support will not continue but will reduce even further. Cuts will continue to be made and those subjects that are considered central to the economy (the so-called STEM subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) will be prioritised. If your subject doesn’t attract large numbers of students or, worse still, doesn’t attract research grants, you’re vulnerable. Consider this Orwellian excerpt contained in a memorandum from a senior administrator at King’s College London which tells us blandly that it is necessary to “create financially viable academic activity by disinvesting from areas that are at sub-critical level” (Thomas 2010). The language is as unlovely as the sentiment is disingenuous.

Do we need universities? If so, what do we need them for? The current upheavals in tertiary education have given the question of the nature, status, role and function of the university more point than it has had for quite some time. “The causes of the media’s sniping at the University are not individual resentments but a more general uncertainty as to the role of the University and the very nature of the standards by which it should be judged as an institution....It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within society nor what the exact nature of that society is, and the changing institutional form of the University is something that intellectuals cannot afford to ignore” (Readings 1996, pp. 1-2). He connects the current uncertainty about the nature and role of the university with the decline of the national state. In his view, the modern university existed to provide the cultural underpinnings of such states and, with their decline, the universities are left without a defining role. I think he is correct in his identification of the uncertainty of nature and purpose that lies at the heart of the contemporary university; however, I think he is profoundly wrong in his
location of that problem in the decline of the modern nation state.

In the age of the internet and immediately accessible information, has the university’s raison d’être disappeared? If there is still a need for the university, what should this university do or be? Is there some one thing a university must be in order to be a university; is there, to use Newman’s words, an ‘idea’ of a university or are universities infinitely malleable? As evidenced by its longevity the university is a remarkably flexible and adaptable institution but it is not infinitely flexible. There are many things it can be and do and still be recognisably the same institution but there are some things it cannot be and do or do and be without ceasing to be a university. The education of students, their intellectual formation, their acquisition of intellectual skills and independence of thought together with, where appropriate, professional training is at the very heart of what it is for something to be a university. Unless it is educating students, a university is not a university but, at best, a research institute.

I remarked earlier that universities, from their very beginning, have not only had a broad general education remit but have had a vocational element, originally in the fields of law, medicine or theology, later in engineering and technology. While education in such areas has a practical dimension, it is “radically incomplete if it remains at the level of the technical or even technological” (Graham 2002, p. 44). Graham believes that those in various professions need an understanding of the significance of their professions. The aim of these vocational subjects is the attainment of a certain kind of practical mastery but these subjects, if they are to be liberal and not merely technical, must be able to give an account of themselves. Academics working in the humanities are tempted to defend what they do on the grounds that their students come to acquire what are known as ‘transferable skills.’ This is a tactical mistake based on a conceptual misunderstanding. As Graham notes, “…justification [of the humanities] in terms of transferable skills offers no support whatever for the content of these subjects” and
he points out that “The error in the appeal to transferable skills does not lie in its falsehood, but in the fact that it attempts to explain value in terms of use....The protagonists of classics, philosophy, Egyptology, Sanskrit or art history who adopt the language of transferable skills need to think again” (Graham 2002, pp. 24-25). The conceptual error that those erstwhile defenders of the humanities make is to accept a commonplace, nonetheless false for being commonplace, that education is valuable only inasmuch as it contributes more or less directly to material enrichment. In saying this, we needn’t go to the other extreme and embrace the view that a liberal education enables one to despise the wealth it prevents one from acquiring. Nonetheless, education is not purely instrumental. It is an end in itself.

For Newman, education brings about an enlargement of the mind and this thought is as true today as when Newman had it. The human mind is not a passive instrument. It does not simply wait around for information to impress itself upon it but, rather, it engages in an “energetic and simultaneous action upon and towards and among those new ideas, which are rushing in upon it. It is the action of a formative power, reduction to order and meaning the matter of our acquirement.” In a robust physical image, Newman compares it to “making the objects of our knowledge subjectively our own...a digestion of what we receive into the substance of our previous state of thought...” (Newman 1889, p. 134). Education is a matter of intellectual character formation; a permanent dispositional change.

Thus characterised, isn’t education useless? Yes, in the same sense that children are useless, that music is useless, that friendship is useless, that conversation is useless, that anything which is an end in itself is useless. That is to say that the concept of the useful has no application here. To think that anything and everything can be judged to be useful is precisely not to be educated.

The ends of education are not extrinsic to the process, as if by being educated we become able to do something we could not otherwise do. The ends of education are intrinsic to the
process; education makes us not so much able to do things (though it does do that), it makes us able to be something we otherwise would not be.

Education is the process by which our basic capacities (both intellectual and moral) are more-or-less permanently modified. These modified capacities (sometimes called somewhat misleadingly, habits (hexeis)) constitute a kind of moral or intellectual capital. They enable us to know and to do easily and accurately what would otherwise be known or done intermittently and with difficulty. Their acquisition, like all capital acquisition, is achieved by restriction, by saving, by abstention from the immediate gratification of natural pleasures. Learning is the formation of intellectual and moral capital, and education is the process by which such capital is formed.

All this being said, it is a valid question to ask how education is provided for in the university. The traditional method of instruction has been the lecture. In a time when scholars alone had ‘the book’ and when in most areas, whether of philosophy, law, theology there were accepted authorities, it made sense for the mode of instruction to be a reading by the lecturer of that book to the students, together with associated comments and glosses. In the age of the internet, when raw information is widely and easily available and anyone with a computer and broadband has access to a wealth of data (good and bad) that previous generations could only dream of, the informational transfer role of the university has receded. This is not something that all academics appreciate. Lectures encourage the ‘assimilate and regurgitate’ mentality which is at odds with university education. Now, more than ever, when the lecture is not the only or even the primary mode of information delivery, the contact between academic and student must be interactive—i.e. seminar, tutorial, workshop, etc.

“But,” it might be objected, “hasn’t the internet made the university redundant?” The market suggests not. Fathom, an internet venture supported by Columbia University and 13 other universities closed after a few years; Caliber, which was an e-partner of Wharton, went bankrupt, and Temple University
ditched its Virtual Temple with indecent haste. NYU Online also closed.

What, in the 21st century, is the added value of the university? Some things can be taught by straight information delivery; others cannot. Here, the process is part of the content, and that process is interactional, human, live and irreplaceable. This has consequences for the ‘normal’ university which must examine traditional teaching methods, particularly the lecture, and ask whether they are, in all circumstances, fit for purpose. When all have access to the basic information, the lecture re-telling this material again is not a good idea. Students are cutting classes with a vengeance now that the lecture notes are online. The lecture originated in a context where only the lecturer had the book and so had to read to the students. There is no justification for making the lecture the primary mode of information delivery in the 21st century. Contact time between students should, whenever possible, be used interactively to explore, evaluate, and practise the knowledge and information already easily available.

One negative development in university teaching over recent years has been the introduction of modularisation. Superficially, this innovation seems perfectly in order. Surely, the student is a consumer and should be free to choose what he wants from an educational menu. In one sense, yes. A student can choose to study philosophy or music or engineering. At this level, choice is just fine. However, within a discipline, a student is not in a position to judge what it is that he should learn—that’s why he’s a student. Whatever about its success from a marketing point of view, educationally, modularisation is nonsense. It fragments disciplines and sticks their dismembered remains to pin boards. Modularisation appears to be designed to put the student at the centre of the education process—but it should be disciplines not students that occupy the centre. When students come to university they begin a trek into the world of scholarship in which their guides are those already engaged in that task.
The notion of modularisation is modelled on the idea that the student is a customer. In the commercial world customers are kings; producers are not in any position to dictate to customers what they should or shouldn’t want. Customers want what they want and that’s the end of the matter. This is not the relationship between student and professor. The object of education is not to fill some sharply determined and particular need but rather to change and indeed to change in some more or less radical way what it is that the students wants and is. The relationship between student and professor is much more like that of inexpert to expert than it is to customer and provider. The expert music teacher induces the requisite practical skill in his students and, even more to the point, elicits, modifies and moulds the music student’s taste. It doesn’t matter whether students like what they are learning or not, at least not in the beginning. Very often, they don’t like it at all. However, the test of whether or not they have been educated is whether they have acquired the skill or skills and also whether their tastes and preferences have been permanently modified (see Graham 2002, p. 48f.).

Modularisation is an attack on this attempted distinction between the student as customer and the student as inexpert. “University students are not only enabled, but encouraged, to pick and choose between the academic courses on offer as one chooses between the goods in a supermarket. The question is this: Is this to their benefit? Or more precisely: is this to the benefit of their education?” (Graham 2002, p. 52) Graham thinks the answer to these questions is no. “...modularization may have brought advantages....it is nevertheless the case that in large measure [it relies on] and strengthens presuppositions about university education that, upon no very close examination, can be shown to be conceptually confused” (Graham 2002, p. 53). What we have here is a conflation of two kinds of choice. Most certainly, a student has the right to choose what discipline, if any, he will follow. However, it is quite another thing to assert that an erstwhile student has the right to be taught, in an institutional setting, how he will be inducted into that discipline.
That is a task, a task that can be performed well or badly, by those who are the acknowledged experts in a given discipline.

**The University and its Managers**

Throughout most of its history, the usual mode of university governance has been collegial. Deans, proctors, and masters did not act as if they were employers of a workforce but were primus inter pares, academics who oversaw the work of other academics and the running of the university in its various modes of self-organisation. Whether modelled on Bologna or Paris, universities were autonomous self-governing corporations (reflecting the structure of the medieval guild) electing their own officials and organising their own assemblies. “At the time of their greatest independence the universities lived in the interstices of medieval society, taking advantage of its decentralization and the balance of its conflicting powers to further their own corporate interests” (Hofstadter 1996, p. 7).

Today, by contrast, our university presidents, provosts and registrars like to think of themselves as chief executives or managing directors. This bizarre self-conception is revealed in their adoption of business speak with its mission statements, strategic plans, logos and corporate images. In Ireland, some years ago, we witnessed the spectacle of our university presidents attempting to justify their extraordinary salaries by comparing themselves to the managers of large multi-national corporations and demanding to be recompensed for their emotional intelligence, an attribute, the presence of which is rendered dubious by the very making of the claim. Talking about the rise of managerialism in the university, Malcolm Saunders describes as ‘academic feudalism’ a system that rewards “obedience, conformity and quiescence, and punishes non-compliance, eccentricity and dissent. Academic feudalism breeds fear, cowardice, cynicism and sycophancy...” (Saunders 2006,p. 11). Another point well made by Saunders is that universities are nowadays more often concerned with research money than with research. Research that doesn’t cost money is
less valued. “Money is not pursued to allow research, research is pursued to attract or acquire money” (p. 12). Whatever the norm was in the past, university administrators today are no longer recruited by temporary secondment from among the academic staff but are full-time administrators who may once have been academics but are so no longer. Once they have gone through the apotheosis from a mere mortal academic to the divine status of what is revealing termed ‘Senior Management’ our new gods rarely deign to condescend to return to the academic ranks whence they came.

Accusations that those who control the universities are not real academics are nothing new. As early as 1909, John. J. Chapman remarked that “the men who control Harvard today are very little else than businessmen, running a large department store which dispenses education to millions” (Chapman 1909, p. 40). Others have pointed out a distinction that you would have thought would have been obvious to all but apparently isn’t, namely, that not all who work in a university are academics, an egregious error endemic in reports in the Irish press which suggests that the reporters are under the that impression (Caws 1970, p. 98).

“UCD [University College Dublin] staff top survey for Ireland’s highest paid educators” is the headline over a front-page piece in UCD’s student newspaper (University Observer). Inside the paper, a companion piece, titled ‘The Wages of Fear’ tells us that a recent Irish Times report reveal that “UCD’s academic staff are among the highest paid in the country”. This would be interesting if true. Is it? That depends on what one means by the terms educator and academic. Lots of people who work in University College Dublin and in other universities are not academics: grounds-keepers, restaurant staff, technicians, school administrators, and personnel officers, Vice-Presidents for this, that and the other, Registrars, Provosts and Presidents. However important the work they do, it’s not education and it’s not academic and they are neither educators nor academics. Some of these workers may have been academics in the past but they are not academics now.
The top 10 of the Irish Times list [“The top 100 best-paid in education” (note, not ‘educators’)] contains five people from UCD: the Vice-President for Research, the Dean of the School of Business, the Principal of the College of Engineering, the President, and the Vice-President for Staff (Flynn and McGuire 2010). When you continue through this list you discover that virtually everybody on that list is a non-academic. You will have no difficulty finding University Presidents and Provosts, IT Presidents, Vice-Presidents and Vice-Provosts; Deans, Directors, Bursars, Principals, Registrars, the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills, the Minister for Education, the Director Generals of FAS, of the Institute of Public Administration, of Science Foundation Ireland, the Director of the ESRI, the Chief Executive of the State Examination Commission, the Chief Executive of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority, and so on, ad nauseam, on the list but you’ll need a Hubble telescope to detect any genuine full-time academics there. In the end, what is truly remarkable about the Irish Times list is the glaring absence of academic staff and educators from the ranks of the most highly paid people who work in the education sector. University administrators are no more academics than are the university’s cleaning staff or its restaurant workers. Like the cleaners or the cooks, university administrators are ancillary staff—much more highly paid than the cleaners of the cooks but still ancillary.

One defensible explanation for the shift in university governance from self-governance to managerialism lies in changes in the size of universities in the recent past. Collegial self-governance is relatively unproblematic when universities are small, with few students, fewer academics and small budgets. With increasing size comes an incentive to move from self-governance by academics to government by management. Until comparatively recently, the number of students in universities was a small proportion of the relevant cohort: 2%, 5%, or 7%. Now it can approach or exceed 50-60%! To get some idea of the effect of numbers, let’s look at the growth of the
higher education section in the USA. In 1939 there were 1,708 institutions with a total enrolment of 1,494,203 whereas in 2003 there were 4,168 institutions with a total enrolment of 15,927,987. The number of academic staff in the same period went from 146,929 in 1939 to 1,173,000 in 2003 (see Schuster and Finkelstein 2006, p. 39). In that 64 year period, the institutions increased by almost 150%, academic staff by almost 700% and students by almost 1,000%. Considerations such as these lend support to the managerialism imperative. The proper response, of course, to this perverse incentive is for universities to become smaller until they can once again be governed by academics.

With the shift from collegial self-governance to managerialism, university bosses are less concerned to defend and protect ordinary academics. Indeed, as we saw above in the media attacks on academics and their high salaries, university administrators by their extravagance often open the academic profession as a whole to unjustified attack. The pressure coming from government, the principal funding agency of many of the universities, is enormous and university administrators, instead of resisting those pressures and defending their staff, are in effect collaborating with the enemy in a quisling-like manner, outdoing each other to show that they can do more with less, which typically means that their academic staff will be forced to do more with less of everything except, unfortunately, less of those who are increasingly telling them what to do. Of the making of managers or senior administrators there is, alas, no end. The cost of administration is constantly rising as a proportion of the amount of money actually spent in universities until, in some institutions, it exceeds 50% of the budget. If one were to add on the costs of Government Departments and government agencies charged with the supervision of the universities, the administrative overheads would appear to eat up much of the entire budget.

A standard political ploy when one wants to attack a certain social group is first to demonise it, then the attack will have public support; one thinks of Jews in Nazi Germany and the monks and their lands in Tudor England or the kulaks in the
early days of the Soviet Union. One now commonly hears it said of academic staff that they can do whatever they please at the public’s expense, thanks to the twin safeguards of academic freedom and tenure. Academics are the new medieval monks, the new kulaks. Derek Bok, former President of Harvard, characterises this cartoonish caricature of academic workers as representing the belief that academics “remain at home most of the day tending their garden or enjoying their hobbies without much fear of detection. So long as they meet their scheduled classes and refrain from criminal acts or other grossly improper behaviour, they can stay happily in their jobs until they retire” (Bok 2003, p. 21). Bok notes that, despite this apparently anarchic situation, the universities (American, that is) are unusually successful in what they do. Perhaps the universities are successful not ‘despite’ the apparently anarchy but rather because of it.

Currently (May 2011) under discussion by academics in Ireland is a take-it-or-leave-it document emanating from the Department of Education which is imbued throughout with the language of managerialism and which evinces throughout its provisions a suspicion that if academics are not constantly watched, monitored and managed, they will spend all their time gardening, double-jobbing or taking never-ending coffee breaks. This document “Application of the Public Service Agreement in the Universities” (APSAU) requires academics to work one extra hour per week at the discretion of management, blithely ignoring the fact that an unknown quantity plus one is still an unknown quantity. It requires academics to implement workload models “to aid the transparent and equitable distribution of work within the university community.” Management (again!) is to be given the authority to vary the proportion of an academic’s teaching, research, scholarly activity and contributions to administration. Academics are required under the APSAU to cooperate with what is called Full Economic Costing (FEC) by completing an Academic Activity Profile and to participate in the university’s Performance
Management and Development System (PMDS). If this isn’t redolent of 1984 and Big Brother, it’s hard to know what is.

How much do academics actually work? Between 1972 and 1998, a period of just over twenty five years, the average hours worked across the range of third level institutions went from 42.9 to 48.6, an increase of just over 13% with the biggest increase and the largest number of hours considered absolutely (50.6) being worked in universities granting graduate degrees (see Schuster and Finkelstein 2006, p. 79). In the approximate 30 year period between 1969 and 1998, the publication rate in all parts of the university sector have increased substantially. The percentage of those who had not published in the previous two years in universities granting graduate degrees dropped from 28.8% to 14%; the percentage of those who had published 5 or more pieces in the previous two years in the same class of institutions went from 19.4% to 40.9%. The same movements down and up, albeit less startling, can be found in the 4-year institutions and the two-year colleges (see Schuster and Finkelstein 2006, p. 100). The evidence, such as it is, suggests that academics on the whole work longer hours than their compeers in other employment sectors and have increased their hours of work and their publication output over the period measured.

According to Slaughter & Leslie, in the times and circumstances in which we live, the idea of the university as a community of scholars will continue to disintegrate further and management will continue to replace governance. University managers will relate best to those parts of the university that generate money. Those academics in those areas, particularly those that generate large amounts of research income, will have relative freedom but academics in other areas can expect to find themselves increasingly hamstrung: “...administrators will assert greater control over departments, beginning by managing the large contingents of part-timers. Regents and trustees concerned with rising institutional costs will encourage administrators to take over more and more planning, until
administrators rather than faculty decide which fields will grow and which will not” (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, p. 243).

In this atmosphere of the assimilation of the university to the world of business, it should come as no surprise that the many and varied schemes that have been proposed for the rejuvenation and reconstruction of business eventually trickle down to the academy. Among the army of acronyms by which these schemes are known to the cognoscenti, we can find PPBS, MBO, ZBB, TQM/CQI and BPR, which stand, respectively, for Planning Programming Budgeting System, Management By Objectives, Zero-Base Budgeting, Total Quality Management/Continuous Quality Improvement and Business Process Reengineering (see Casey 2006). Two additional non-acronymised schemes are Strategic Planning and Benchmarking. The hulks of such schemes litter the shorelines of academia. Some unkind person, possible a failed philosophy student, remarked that there is no theory so foolish that some philosopher has not adopted it; likewise, none of our acrynomic schemes is so foolish, bankrupt or inappropriate that it has not been adopted by the academy, usually about the time when its defects had become manifest in business, a point established at some length by Robert Birnbaum (2001).

The most radical of such schemes, surely the most audacious, is Business Process Reengineering. Its thesis is simple. Whatever you’ve been doing up to now is wrong. Stop doing it! Wipe out all existing structures and start again from scratch! “In business reengineering,” Birnbaum remarks “old job titles and old organizational arrangements—departments, divisions, groups, and so on—cease to matter” (Birnbaum 2001, p. 109). It is, of course a romantic illusion to believe that there was some golden age when universities were like the Garden of Eden before the slithering arrival of the serpents of block grants, accountability, FTEs and Resource Allocation Models. It is, however, an equally dangerous romantic illusion to imagine (as Graham has noted) that the university is a kind of Rousseauian lump of clay that, as in the dreams of Business Process Reengineering and the nightmares of everyone else, can be
modelled according to the will of those momentarily in control of it. At its best, such voluntaristic hubris is a harmless distraction; at its worst, it can result in an outbreak of African Map Syndrome, named after those 19th century Colonial Office officials who thought that what they had to do to sort out African affairs was simply to sharpen up their pencils, get out the map of the Dark Continent, draw nice neat lines on it and then retire for drinks to the Senior Conservative with the satisfying feeling that their duty had been done.

Less intrinsically malign to institutional integrity than Business Process Reengineering but with its own destructive potential is Strategic Planning. This is almost certain to be the case if Strategic Planning becomes Central Planning. The political shortcomings of central planning were graphically demonstrated in the 20th century in China, the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, in Kampuchea, and elsewhere. Economically, the ‘calculation debate’ has shown convincingly that central planning not only does not work but that it cannot work. The situation is little different in academia. Plans indeed there must be if we are not to be complacent, or flounder from one crisis to another but the plans must respect that balance between the old and the new, the top and the bottom, the essential and the ephemeral that Confucius so eloquently expressed.

In commencement speeches and graduations and other formal occasions, Newman and his idea of a university is mentioned reverentially. Alas, that those who mention Newman in these contexts seem to be innocent of any of his thought other than the title of his book. One author has written that

If Newman had really been profoundly and consistently influential, we would not have much of the machinery of administration, the structure and content of courses, the huge array of rules and regulations, the debates over access, over SAT scores in the US and A-levels and Highers in England and Scotland. We wouldn’t be talking bureaucratically
about ‘seat time,’ ‘enrollment (sic) targets,’ interactive teaching technologies, modular systems of instruction. Newman’s vocabulary and conceptualization would not have led us to discuss quality control mechanisms, student transfer, the relationship of further education to higher education, contract research, funding, loan policies, pension schemes for academics (Rothblatt 2006, p. 5).

Similarly, Gordon Graham remarks,

The universities of Britain have been blown hither and thither by modularisation, semesterization, academic audit, quality assurance, staff appraisal, resource allocation modelling, on-line management, student evaluation, research assessment and countless other ‘initiatives’. All this might seem like a nostalgic longing for the return of the ‘good old days’ but, since there never were such days, we cannot return to them.

Critically, Gordon concludes that “What [the universities] have not done is to deploy their own intellectual resources to take critical stock of these changes. Consequently, they have not exhibited that very critical independence which must lie at the heart of their rationale (p. 17).

The RAE (now the REF—Research Excellence Framework) was devised as an instrument for measuring the extent to which academics were contributing to the advance of knowledge and understanding. This is a crude and counter-productive instrument. One of its presuppositions is that continuous publication is a sign of academic well-being with an accompanying prioritisation of research at the expense of teaching. This system encourages academics “to spend as little time as possible on teaching by applying for research leave, negotiating reductions in their lecturing and tutorial hours, and competing for research fellowships and professorships to free...
them from students altogether” (Graham 2002, p. 14). Research (and publication) has always been assessed by academics on behalf of the academic community; what is new is the formalisation (and mechanisation) of the process by the use of standard indicators on behalf of so-called management. “RAE has the nature of a race in which no one believes, but in which everyone has to take part, and to do so vigorously and with the appearance of enthusiasm” (Graham 2002, p. 76). Unfortunately, as every academic knows, acceptance by a reputable journal isn’t conclusive evidence of value; nor is rejection, conclusive evidence of worthlessness and citation indices are intrinsically bizarre inasmuch as merely counting citations is entirely indiscriminate—you may be cited because you are good, or because you are bad!

Quality Assessment (and Quality Enhancement) are yet more bureaucratic tools of management that measure the insignificant and fail to measure the significant. The entire Quality Assessment exercise is radically misconceived. The examiners appear to be selected for their lack of knowledge and their distrust of what it is that universities do. The exercises themselves are a waste of time and money, time perhaps more than money. Preparation for the Quality Assessment carries a huge opportunity cost taking up valuable time that could have been put to other good uses, distracting the members of the Department being assessed from what it is that they are really supposed to be doing. It is important to realise that these exercises are not just harmless but are actually positively harmful in that “…the need to produce a paper trail mean that huge amounts of time were spent on doing so, with the ironic result that teaching was reduced in order to allow to prepare for ‘the QAA’” (Graham 2002, p. 59). A mordant comment on the futility of both the Research Assessment and Teaching Quality assessment comes from Alan Ryan, who writes

The Teaching Quality Assessment system rewards departments which waste the time of two faculty members for a year to assemble the paperwork that will get the department a perfect
score. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a flat-footed five-yearly form of peer evaluation; in the US, informal but continuous peer competition and peer evaluation produce widely accepted rank orders that anyone funding research would go along with. Princeton has a Nobel prize-winning physics department because it is always looking over its shoulder at its rivals, not fidgeting about the RAE (p. 29).

The universities came into being to fulfil certain felt needs in society at a particular place and particular time; they are historically contingent institutions, not eternal verities. Over the years, they have adapted themselves to the changing requirements of their circumstances without abandoning their original calling. If they are to survive, let alone, flourish, then they will need financial independence to free them from the malign and heavy hand of government, the enemy without, and a return to a robust form of self-governance to free them from the inept hand of academic managers, the enemy within. In 2012, the prospect of attaining either of these goals in any meaningful way in the near future appears remote.

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