The idea of a world university: Can Foucauldian research offer a vision of educational futures?

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ABSTRACT: Foucauldian research, as it is currently practised, is generally unwilling to offer a vision of alternative futures. This article examines the recent work of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2009; 2007) which appears to be an exception. They offer a critique of contemporary trends in higher education and propose an alternative model: the ‘world university’. However, as I argue, their scheme for a world university is of limited use in its current form precisely because it is an anti-utopian recommendation. This reflects a deep suspicion of utopian thought that is typical of Foucauldian research. After examining the reasons for Foucault’s aversion to openly normative, futurist thought, I suggest that the making of anti-utopian proposals can only lead a Foucauldian analysis into paradox. It seems that those who adopt a Foucauldian approach must either remain silent when it comes to the future, or they must adapt their use of Foucault to embrace a substantial utopian dimension.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; power; university; utopia; genealogy.

Introduction

In educational research, the work of Michel Foucault has inspired a whole generation of scholars. It has led to a highly productive though loosely aligned field of enquiry, addressing diverse areas of educational practice, helping to reveal operations of power in the most mundane of educational techniques. Nevertheless, and despite this great profusion of research, the Foucauldian perspective is also highly restrictive. For those who go beyond a superficial use of Foucauldian theory and attempt to practise ‘genealogy’ itself, there is an immediate set of constraints that must be considered. This surrounds the injunction that critique should not pass over into recommendation: critique should not adopt the ‘premise of a deduction that concludes, ‘this, then, is what needs to be done’” (Foucault 1978b, 236).

It could be argued that those who disagree with this directive should simply ignore it. However, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, to do so is not as simple as it appears. If a researcher using Foucault’s methods wishes to offer recommendation alongside critique, far deeper adjustments to the Foucauldian approach are required. When critical researchers choose to go beyond critique and suggest alternatives to current regimes of power, their research must be animated by some idea or ‘vision of an integrated social totality’ towards which it works (Webb 2009, 748). In other words, a substantial utopian
dimension must be admitted. Without this admission the recommendations of such research will be limited.

In this paper, I develop this argument by examining the work of two scholars who have decided to make a connection between critique and recommendation. In a series of recent publications, the co-authors Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein have employed Foucauldian ideas to provide a critique of the university. They analyse contemporary trends in education across Europe and suggest that the public role of the university is at risk of becoming lost, or at least reduced to a set of measurable functions. As these authors pass from critique to recommendation, we are told that it is time to imagine an alternative role for the university, one that evades current trends towards functional reduction, and avoids older more elitist ideas of what the university is all about. We are then provided with a model that is supposedly adequate for the task. They call it the ‘world university’. However, upon closer inspection, their vision of a future institution appears strangely abstracted from the public it seeks to serve. It seems that Simons and Masschelein have been led to recommend a type of institution that is unable to engage in any meaningful way with issues of public concern. My central claim is that this problem arises from the analytic roots of their argument. As a general rule, the Foucauldian perspective is deeply suspicious of utopian thought. Consequently, any recommendations that are made from this position are likely to be thin on content and emancipatory potential. The ‘world university’ is a case in point.

The entrepreneurial university

Over a series of articles, Simons and Masschelein provide a careful diagnosis of the current state of the university project. Taking inspiration in part from The Order of Things (Foucault 1966) they contrast our present epoch to the time of the ‘modern historical university’ and the ‘premodern or medieval university’ that preceded it (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 205).

In premodern times, so the argument goes, people experienced ‘their finitude in confrontation with an infinite (God) outside of the world’. In the period of modernity, by contrast, the experience of finitude (the state of having limits or bounds) no longer relates to such external beings. Instead, ‘the relation between God and human finitude transmutes in modernity to become a secular relation between infinite processes within the world and within humanity’ (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 206).

Therefore, as we enter modernity, the role of the university changes. It is now the place from which eminent scholars, luminaries and scientists gain access to these historical processes. The modern university helps to uncover truth and reveal the nature of our position within broader historical currents, as we seek to overcome our human finitude by mastering these autonomous formations. Through a deepening knowledge of our position within the development of history, the university becomes the ‘self-proclaimed gatekeeper of historical progress and emancipation’. It is the bastion of enlightenment that ‘orients society and culture towards progress’ (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 206) and it contains the sort of intellectual who believes it is his or her job to guide the rest of us by virtue of his or her learned expertise (Simons and Masschelein 2007a, 142). The state is called upon to support such institutions and
it should not expect direct economic returns, for the modern university is situated above and beyond such immediate concerns.

The cultivated aloofness of these bastions of progress, enlightenment and truth is now under threat. We live in an era of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ that is defined by an entirely different relation to the world. The entrepreneurial university no longer seeks to guide us towards a better future through its privileged understanding of the processes that underlie our existence (though relics of this modern university remain). Instead, time collapses into an entrepreneurial concern with the present, a concern to maximise existing resources. Overall, there has been a ‘shift from historical to environmental self-understanding’. Time, in terms of ‘the arrow pointing to the future’ is no longer the main organising principle (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 205-6). Instead, we learn to live within and deal with the constraints of our immediate environment.

The experience of finitude has now changed from a [modern] drive to understand and master anonymous historical processes, to ‘the [entrepreneurial] experience of being permanently in a condition with limited resources’ (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 208). The guiding principles of progress and emancipation are replaced by more foreshortened notions such as empowerment, innovation and excellence. “Innovation” in particular is ‘an ahistorical concept and has no point of orientation beyond what is needed or available in a competitive environment’ (ibid., 209). The university must accommodate itself to the competitive environment from which it cannot be extracted and decide how best it may maximise its potential.

There is still some room for ambition and hope, but these motivations are changing from an orientation towards progress and emancipated futures, to a desire to become the best amongst competitors. The School of Education in which I study may not be alone in displaying a set of values upon its walls, according to which it “aspires to be one of the best in the world”. The Lisbon strategy holds similar ambitions for encouraging competition at a European level (Simons and Masschelein 2009) and so it goes on.

The dangers

According to the argument presented by these authors, this transition is not without consequence, nor is it benign. Whilst the modern university was hardly flawless, the entrepreneurial replacement comes with its own dangers, which include the possible dissolution of the university itself. A final decomposition of the university is conceivable because in an entrepreneurial age it is now sensible to ask: ‘Why do we still need universities when it is possible that each of its functions (research, teaching, service/innovation) is being performed more efficiently (more excellently) by other monofunctional institutions?’ (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 205). In educational research there is evidence to suggest that a process of partial decomposition has already begun (Ball 2010).

Simons and Masschelein argue that in the face of such functional reduction, we need to appeal to an organising principle of some sort by which we may hold the university together. Of course, the
functional separation and removal of some parts of the contemporary university could be worthwhile: the growing university-military complex (Langley, Parkinson and Webber 2008; Langley 2009) is an obvious contender for excision. The above dilemma nonetheless remains; by what principle do we hold the remainder together?

In addition to the risk of its own dissolution, we are told that the entrepreneurial university is dangerous in another sense: ‘While academics in the historical university understand themselves as a detached species capable of modernising society (based on matters of fact), the academics in the entrepreneurial university are required to regard their public role in terms of the innovation of society (being responsive to matters of need)’ (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 210-11). The problem with this institutional switch is that it brings about a type of immunisation and detachment that is peculiar to the entrepreneurial university. It results in ‘the creation of a collective of individuals/organisations sharing nothing except for their permanent attempt to face the needs of the outside environment’ (ibid., 213).

Simons and Masschelein provide the conceptual framework for this process of immunisation by returning to Kant’s famous 1784 essay on enlightenment. In this essay, Kant makes a clear distinction between the public and the private use of reason: The public use of reason is the freedom to publicly voice one’s thoughts without fear of reprisal. This is contrasted to the private use of reason that is employed when carrying out a particular civil post or office (i.e. a university post). Here one acts as part of the system; that is with obedience and fidelity to the institution that one serves. Kant tells us that this rather circumscribed, private use of reason is necessary so that government can achieve its ‘public ends’ (Kant 1784, 60). However, the public use of reason by state employees must also still be allowed. Whilst they should demonstrate obedience in day-to-day administrative-functional tasks, when it comes to more abstract, less directly practical matters, they are permitted to make public the use of their reason in the interests of a wider citizenry. Obedience in carrying out one’s duties is to be combined with the facility to address a wider citizenry on issues of public concern. This combination would result in a functioning, cohesive, but open society.

Extending this Kantian framework to the present, Masschelein and Simons make the following observation: As the entrepreneurial university spreads throughout the world (encouraging excellence and innovation in an environment of mutual competitive rivalry), an expanding realm is formed within which the private use of reason is the only form that is used. Those who work within this global university space are increasingly preoccupied by the enhancement of their own institutions. They become absorbed within the private use of reason (Masschelein and Simons 2009).

Perspectives inevitably shorten due to rising ‘terrors of performativity’ where performance alone is all that matters (Ball 2003) and with the old securities of academia in decline, an ‘ethos of obedience or submission to a permanent quality tribunal’ becomes dominant (Masschelein and Simons 2009, 237). As academics are increasingly absorbed in the pursuit of excellence, innovation, impact, ranking, fund-seeking and so on, the realm occupied by the private use of reason grows to envelop university life,
resulting in considerable distraction. This is what Masschelein and Simons mean by the immunisation of universities and academics from the world they once sought to guide.

It is clear that these are bold claims, though they are intended more as a provocation to further research and discussion than as a final diagnosis of the present. Either way, this is an unsettling account that both demands our attention and compels us to look beyond our own foreshortened concerns.

Masschelein and Simons suggest that we need a new organising principle for the university: We must work towards a different sort of institution, one that is neither modern nor entrepreneurial. They recommend what they call the ‘world university’, a type of institution that raises issues of concern about which an interested public can then gather. It would shed its ‘belief in pure matters of fact - that is, a reality that stands as an inside world, that offers authority to researchers and puts common people into a position of ignorance or mere opinion’ (Simons and Masschelein 2009, 213). It would also avoid being merely responsive to matters of need, which as we have seen acts to immunise the university, and also presumes that the university is the ‘gatekeeper to the world of facts’ and solutions (ibid.). The idea, on which the world university and its employees should model themselves, is the idea that they have a public role. This role is more restricted than their role in the modern university in one sense but more expansive in another. The world university restricts itself by recognising that it must not appropriate social issues and turn them into privatised questions for the expert to solve. However, the world university extends itself by recognising that its modified public role requires that it communicate with its public over matters of concern. It turns objects into matters of concern by demonstrating the ‘complicated entanglements’ of matters of fact, or matters of need. This generates a space where it is clear that nobody has an answer, that deliberation and dialogue are required, a place where the ‘hierarchy between those who have access [to detached matters of fact] and those who do not’, between ‘experts or enlightened academics and common people’, breaks down (ibid. 212). A crucial aspect of this reorientation is that experts should also convey an impression of the limits of their knowledge, thus demystifying expertise and encouraging engagement, deliberation and experiment in the public that responds to their provocations. They should not give the impression that they are speaking in terms of universal truths or privileged points of access. This university would instead become ‘a place where people gather around matters of concern as a public of world citizens’ (Masschelein and Simons 2009, 237).

A world university

Despite first appearances this world university idea is a profoundly anti-utopian proposal, and in that respect it reflects the Foucauldian origins of their critique. As Masschelein and Simons (2009, 239) are careful to explain, their suggestion for a world university ‘is not inspired by some ideal or vision of a better world’. Instead, it is to be built upon existing practices that are ‘increasingly in the margins’ of the university that ‘seeks to be entrepreneurial’ (ibid., 237). The idea - that we must build upon existing practices rather than invent new ones - resembles the sort of ‘tactically effective’ analysis that Foucault himself sought to offer. Indeed, this is a defining feature of the methodological approach Foucault
named ‘genealogy’. It is an approach that aims to discover and thereby promote existing ‘lines of force’, rather than recommend new ones (Foucault 1978a, 3). Before I develop this outline of Foucault and genealogy, it is necessary to explore the potential limitations of the world university idea.

Basing a university project upon the ‘public use of reason’ where (1) university scholars interrupt us with matters of concern that (2) become the points of discussion for a world citizenry, is surely laudable enough. Conveying an impression of the limits of one’s expertise is also important. However, we are told that this discussion would be one from which the expert subsequently retreats in recognition of his or her own limitations. The key academic role would be to raise issues of public concern, yet this intervention must always fall short of providing guidance, direction or visions of a better world. For me, it is precisely at this point that problems begin: By refusing to speak “in the name of” a particular vision towards which we are implored to work, by refusing to provide ‘guidance or orientation’ (Masschelein and Simons 2009, 240-1), is this species of academic not always condemned to halt mid-breath? Is this injunction to be modest and withdraw not also a form of immunisation? Masschelein and Simons would disagree. They argue that the committed academic is also the academic who hides behind his or her cause, theory or method, who uses these commitments to prevent him or herself from becoming exposed to real issues of concern. This sort of thinker is unable to practise the necessary degree of openness and honesty about his or her own limitations that would cultivate genuine discussion in the public he or she seeks to address.

There appears to me to be a fear of closure here, a fear that the academic who speaks in the name of a particular cause, is unable to provoke thought and discussion. The idea is that those who are committed will only ever seek to transmit their knowledge as experts. They will not act as a ‘conduit’ for matters of concern, but as a block to genuine thought (Masschelein and Simons 2009, 244). Instead, the ‘world university’ should invent ‘procedures to slow down and provoke thinking’ (ibid., 242). We should resist the ‘comfort of a position’ and refuse to bring the present ‘before a court’. We must be prepared to lose our way and become ‘disorientated’ and should not pretend to find any ‘unity behind the complex diversity’ towards which we then look for guidance (Simons and Masschelein 2007b, 12). As academics we ought not entertain such closure; openness is the only thing for which we must fight. Finally, and significantly, we are told that the university should not break into factions. Its internal dynamic should not resemble ‘war with other means’ (Masschelein and Simons 2009, 245).

These are all themes that can be found elsewhere in Foucauldian scholarship. This desire to avoid analytic closure is understandable enough, but one cannot quite shake free of the feeling that such post-modern, post-entrepreneurial, cultivated ‘disorientation’ is rather a privilege. This would appear to be a mode of intellectual work that only a minority of relatively securely employed academics could ever hope to enjoy.

Insofar as the world university is based upon the Kantian public-private distinction, it is worth returning to the context of this idea. As Laursen (1996) explains in ‘The Subversive Kant’ - that 1784 essay in the Berlinische Monatsschrift represented a bold move made against the threat of rising Prussian state
censorship. It was a deliberate effort to counter legal definitions that equated 'public' with all that is owned by the Prince.

I would argue that if we are tempted to invoke Kant’s distinction today, we should first question its relevance. Does it still make sense to be guided by this division of intellectual labour? In countries where such overt state censorship no longer exists, is it reasonable to base our hopes on a conceptual separation that comes from a different era? This seems particularly pertinent to a post-internet (and post-Foucault) age where the ability to self-publish and make views public has become significantly easier. Though disciplinary and cultural restrictions on the sayable are certainly part of our present-day lives, this is not a problem of state restriction in the sharing of views.

In an article titled 'The Masked Philosopher', Foucault once proposed a year of anonymous publishing. This would be a year of pure, public, disembodied interchange without personal authorial connections (Foucault 1980). One might argue that a suggestion such as this represents Kant’s ‘public reason’ in its ideal form, ideas circulating without authorial connection, thought operating without the corruptions of personal circumstance, all contributions valued according to their individual merit, regardless of reputation or canon. Perhaps though, Kant’s (and Foucault’s) position is in need of reformulation.

Whilst this distinction between public and private reason has its merits as a conceptual tool in the above critique of immunisation in the entrepreneurial university, it becomes problematic when depended upon to define a comeback strategy for university researchers. If academics are becoming trapped within the private use of reason, is it sufficient to argue for a greater public use of reason? Or does this promote a type of escape by which researchers justify their retreat from direct and personally committed engagement with worldly concerns? Perhaps a different type of response is necessary. It may, on the contrary, be time to occupy a position and speak in the name of a political dream. It might be worth adopting a mode of scholarship that is committed rather than abstracted, or when scholarship is abstracted, ensuring such abstraction has a specific commitment in mind.

To appreciate why this normative embrace is less desirable than it first appears (or at least more problematic than it seems), it is necessary to develop a more thoroughgoing appreciation of the position that Simons and Masschelein adopt. Insofar as they reject speaking in the name of a cause, occupying an openly normative position, subscribing to an explicit socially transformative project and so on, they also reflect the approach to such matters that Foucault once took. Therefore, if we are to understand the self-imposed limitations of their world university idea, it is necessary to address the ideas of the philosopher from whom these tastes for self-restraint were derived.

**Foucault: knowledge and power**

Foucault resists easy classification. For the sake of space I will refer to him as a philosopher of power and its relation to knowledge. The basic presumption is that knowledge is never found without power, and power never operates without a corresponding form of knowledge. Though Foucault wished to
avoid a grand or universal theory of power, seeking instead to describe how it operates in a particular context, there are some general points that can be made.

Power is not ‘a primal right that is surrendered’ to a governing group or person in some sort of mutually beneficial contractual relationship (Foucault 1976, 17). This conception of power entails questions such as: What is the basis of this contract? What is a legitimate exercise of power? At what point does legitimate power reach its limit and become oppression? How should we establish checks and balances to restrict power? Et cetera…

The opposite of contractual power is repressive power, where repression ‘is not what oppression was in relation to the contract, namely an abuse’. On the contrary, repression is ‘simply the effect and the continuation of a relationship of domination’ (ibid.). And yet, according to Foucault, power is not repression either or, at least, repression is only one of the final forms that power can take.

Instead, Foucault insists, power depends upon freedom. That is, power only exists where there is the possibility of manoeuvre. This dependence of power upon freedom reverses the commonly received view where power and freedom are opposites. This is because the Foucauldian view of power is a relational entity that pervades the social body, manifesting itself in human interaction. Concentrations of power are now explained in terms of the successful manipulation of such dispersion. Thus, power is not projected downwards, which is a clear inversion of the commonly received view, according to which power comes from above. The conventional idea of power is nonetheless very persistent. Even when we deal with power at a local level, we are tempted to suggest that it “represents” the wider interests of capital, patriarchy, the State and so on. Yet, according to Foucault, these are just ‘displacements’ by which we ‘dodge’ the real question of power in all its complex detail, deciding instead that ‘all of this derives from a market economy, or capitalist exploitation, or simply this rotten society’ (Foucault 1977, 211). To suggest that power comes from below and that it is only co-opted from above, is a bold reconfiguration. Foucault is candid enough to acknowledge the counter-intuitive effects of his view. He realises this is ‘essentially asking the elliptical god of battles to explain the long days of order’ (Foucault 1976, 54). And yet, he is not discouraged.

Order is ‘something fragile and superficial’ that is ‘built on top of this web of bodies, accidents, and passions, this seething mass which is sometimes murky and sometimes bloody’ (Foucault 1976, 54). It is built through a growing ‘rationality of technical procedures that are used to perpetuate the victory, to silence, or so it would seem, the war, and to preserve or invert the relationship of force’ (ibid., 55). Codified power relations are associated with forms of knowledge, ranging from well-established scientific disciplines that are closely connected to administrative bodies, to counter-discourses that are not connected with the presiding rationalities of government. Foucault’s aim was to question the atemporal, universal and scientific status of regimes of knowledge (particularly in the human sciences), by demonstrating their contingent, historical construction. It was hoped that such a project of critique could help to bring about an ‘insurrection of knowledges’ and thus an opening in relations of power (ibid., 9).
The approach is deeply historical. Drawing from the work of Nietzsche, Foucault sought to unravel the lines of force that have brought us to our present. Genealogy assumes that ‘anything which exists...can be reinterpreted in the service of new intentions, repossessed, repeatedly modified to a new use by a power superior to it’ (Nietzsche 1887, II §12, 58). The ‘entire history of a “thing”, an organ, a custom’ takes ‘the form of an extended chain of signs, of ever-new interpretations and manipulations, whose causes do not themselves necessarily stand in relation to one another, but merely follow and replace one another arbitrarily and according to circumstance’ (ibid.). The genealogical task is to prise apart these multiple historical forces that have brought about such changes in form, and therefore demonstrate the contingency of our present.

For the purposes of our argument, we should observe that dispersed power also changes the perceived role of intellectual or critic. Critique can no longer adopt the ‘premise of a deduction that concludes, “this, then, is what needs to be done” (Foucault 1978b, 236). To make such recommendations would demand a global view of the problem that is to be addressed. However, the intellectual or critic is unable to perceive all or to judge what are the most important aspects to be addressed. This would demand reference to a dominant principle, underlying causality or basic essence. For Foucault, the hidden contradiction or motor of human affairs is undiscoverable simply because such hidden, core concerns or basic drivers of reality, do not exist. Power comes from everywhere.

Therefore, the work of a Foucauldian researcher cannot provide guidance. It can only present itself as an instrument for those others who fight, resist and refuse. Foucault was ‘not interested in constructing a new schema or in validating one that already exists’ (Foucault 1978b, 237). Instead he sought after reality in all its dispersion, looking beyond knowledge claims to the relations of power that sustain them. Foucault took up a position of tactical (and shifting) relation towards contemporary events.

Foucault: avoiding normativity

According to some, this refusal to adopt a position is unsustainable. Habermas (1985) argued that without a solid normative foundation, Foucauldian critique is unable to answer the question “Why Fight?”. If genealogy will not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate power, how can it decide on whose behalf it will do battle? If it is ‘just a matter of mobilizing counterpower, of strategic battles and wily confrontations, why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power circulating in the bloodstream of the body of modern society, instead of just adapting ourselves to it?’ (Habermas 1985, 95). In order to decide what is dangerous, so the argument goes, and in order to decide what we should confront, some benchmark or vision of a better world is required.

This attack helped spawn a rather involved and seemingly interminable field of debate. See for example the collections edited by Kelly (1994) and Ashenden and Owen (1999). In defence of genealogy some suggest that Habermas simply fails to understand Foucault’s position and that genealogy is not required to respond with its own normative framework, i.e. normative frameworks are amongst the very things genealogy seeks to examine and render problematic (see for example; Dean 1994). Others
sympathetic to Foucault argue that we should not be seduced into ‘thinking that we are confronted with only two possibilities’, there are unresolved issues, and it remains to be explained how we can engage in critique without normative foundations (Bernstein 1992, 234).

There is no space to consider this debate in detail here. However, it is worth pointing out that we can approach these issues from a different angle, switching from Foucault to the way in which his ideas have subsequently been used. This approach is less common, though it has the potential to be far more revealing. For example, it has been suggested that Foucauldian power is potentially pacifying in its effects upon the otherwise critical researcher (Allen 2009). Commenting on the influential school of thought that builds upon and extends Foucault’s analysis of ‘governmentality’, Dean (2007: 86) has suggested that there is ‘a narrowing of the relationship’ between a liberal approach to government and ‘the analysis offered by governmentality studies’. Goddard (2010, 350) goes further, arguing that the Foucauldian conception of the individual subject shares similarities to the neoliberal subject, and therefore genealogy is ‘all too prone to a discursive slide from analysis and description to resignation’. By no means a representative of mainstream governmental thought but just as revealing, Stenson (1998) has even argued that governmentality studies should be deployed as a deliberate tool to reinforce liberalism and its promotion of autonomy. There is clearly reason to doubt the ability of Foucauldian work to achieve sufficient critical distance from contemporary trends.

These claims notwithstanding, one often finds reference in genealogical work to its ‘modest’ aspirations. As Barry, Osborne and Rose (1996, 2) suggest, if only in some small way we manage to ‘increase the “thinkability” of the relations of force that shape our present’, we have served our analytic purpose. Even those who wish Foucauldians would take a more critical stance, seem concerned to outline the limits of genealogy: theorists working within this tradition should only ‘create knowledge that will assist social contestation’, i.e. political engagement takes the form of analytic assistance rather than the adoption and support of an explicit political position (O’Malley, Weir and Shearing 1997, 512).

It is true that Rose (1999, 490-1) once called for ‘a politics of moral outrage’ that deploys ‘real inventiveness’ so as to achieve ‘a radical reshaping of reality itself’. But we are left wondering how such a deployment would function without a substantial normative vision. This radical invitation is nevertheless a rare exception in the work of Rose and others; the Foucauldian way generally lacks any sort of commitment that may have a normative scent about it. It is dedicated to a form of analysis that is ‘grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary’ (Foucault 1971, 368) pursuing power in all its dispersion.

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To summarise: Foucault avoided prescriptive thought and visions of a better world because these approaches ignore at their peril the basic absence of any central organising social principle. According to the dispersion of power, it makes little sense for intellectuals to claim privileged access to its relational flux, as such access is impossible. Indeed, Foucault’s take on power makes intellectual recommendation look ‘flimsy when delivered from a teaching institution’ (Foucault 1978a, 3). The ‘dimension of what is to be done can only appear within a field of real forces, that is to say within a field of forces that cannot be
created by a speaking subject alone and on the basis of his words, because it is a field of forces that
cannot in any way be controlled or asserted within this kind of imperative discourse'. All that the critical
intellectual can do, is furnish those who find themselves within this field with a few ‘tactical pointers’
(ibid.).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, for some critics of Foucault (amongst whom Habermas is the best
known), his approach is limited by the fact that it has nothing to recommend. It deliberately avoids
prescriptive thought and alternative visions that might indicate how education, which is our concern,
should be reformed. The world university proposed by Simons and Masschelein is a little eccentric in this
respect offering an alternative blueprint of sorts, yet it fails to escape the limitations of Foucauldian
thought. The preference for self-restraining non-intervention is clearly operative within Masschelein and
Simons’ world university. However, as I have argued above, there is a problem with this subsequent use
of Foucault, where justifiable restraint risks becoming a mode of withdrawal. Though Foucault managed
to combine his analytic restraint with a form of ‘hyper- and pessimistic activism’ (Foucault 1983, 256) this
is a difficult combination to maintain. Foucault was no stranger to political protest, direct action, broken
ribs, arrest and deportation (Macey 1993), but his followers probably are. It is in this context that it may
be worth experimenting with a return to activism in Foucauldian scholarship, even though this will be a
difficult balance to strike if we are to avoid reducing Foucault’s critical insight through bald statements of
normative commitment. However, it may be a project worth pursuing if the academic quietism in
Foucauldian scholarship is as prevalent as I suggest.

Conclusion: beyond a world university

According to the analysis presented above, the entrepreneurial university risks immunising itself from
issues of wider concern. In response, Masschelein and Simons suggest a set of ideas that could form the
basis of a resurrection whereby the university becomes concerned once again with providing a public
good, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of its rather more self-assured modernist forebear. A limiting factor in
our contemporary epoch is, so they say, the environmental worldview that constrains us into shuffling
existing resources at the expense of our wider engagement with issues of public concern. Whilst the
historical time of the modern university tied us to certain conceptions of human progression, the current
environmental mindset maroons us in the present.

Despite these insights, there are two problems with the analysis offered by Simons and
Masschelein. On the one hand, it underestimates the resistive potential of the entrepreneurial university.
On the other, it suggests an alternative, the world university, that risks falling into the trap identified for
its predecessor. I call these the problem of underestimation and the problem of further immunisation
respectively.

The problem of underestimation: The immunising potential of the entrepreneurial university appears as
a very real danger, and in this respect the argument of Simons and Masschelein is timely and important.
However, we should remain open to the possibility that the sort of entrepreneurial selves fabricated by
this type of university may also embody a more promising aspect. Alongside the hollowing out that we can identify in these detached perspectives, there may be some positive effects. The shortening of outlook associated with this rise in the entrepreneurial self, is linked to rising cultures of performativity in the public sector, where performance alone is becoming what matters. Stephen Ball has offered a vigorous critique of such developments, yet towards the end of his argument we find some interesting by-products: For example, the sort of ‘gamesmanship’ that performativity encourages can also act in ‘eluding or deflecting direct surveillance’. This occurs when individuals fabricate superficial facades, designed to comply with the requirements of their particular quality tribunal. A related effect is that these ‘representational artefacts’ may actually make public sector organisations more rather than less ‘opaque’ (Ball 2003, 225), which could be useful for resisting external intervention. So it may well be that the entrepreneurial self contains some exciting possibilities for resistive practice (as well as some dangers). Overall, this ability to reposition tactically in the face of contingency may be an advantageous political disposition.

The problem of further immunisation: The main difficulty with the ‘world university’ alternative is that it seems strangely withdrawn from worldly concerns. This is down to the anti-utopian nature of the proposal and a post-modern antipathy to global analyses, according to which members of the world university must not make recommendations or issue visions of a better world. Academics should only raise areas of public concern before withdrawing from the debate. The importance here given to intellectual self-restraint and withdrawal from political advocacy is typical of the Foucauldian approach, and yet this approach risks cultivating its own species of immunisation and detachment.

This is not to forget the warnings of Simons and Masschelein according to whom the environmental worldview also maroons us in the present. It does not ignore their observation that a type of university is currently under construction that is at risk of immunising itself from the world outside. When we allow ourselves to become obsessed with maximising existing resources there is a contradictory effect: the entrepreneurial university is born; a place that responds to matters of need rather than pursuing broader, less instrumental issues of public concern. The university becomes a place that encourages the cultivation of entrepreneurial selves, locked within the injunction to continually innovate and pursue excellence; trapped within an expanding realm for which the private use of reason is becoming the only use of reason… All these are valuable insights.

A form of university that seeks to make public, issues of concern, will of course aid critical work. But the picture of a ‘world university’ generated by Simons and Masschelein seems to assume a form of public life outside its walls that simply doesn’t exist today. It ignores or fails to address the unequal realities that persist within the public that it would gather around itself over specific issues of concern. In this respect, their anti-utopian proposal unwittingly contains a deep though disavowed utopian dimension. It fails to address the flux of power outside its institutional walls where shifting structures, inequalities, antagonisms and conflict are just some of the issues to be faced. The world university must engage with this reality, not simply by raising issues of concern, but by realising that its overall project of
enlightenment cannot be divorced from the fluctuations and unequal realities of the public it seeks to gather.

Of course, we can sympathise with Masschelein and Simons’ world university, to the extent that it is consistent with their analytic approach. A Foucauldian approach that embraces the dispersion of power, cannot hope to reveal any basic contradictions operating within society nor can it issue recommendations for a better world. This would deny the dispersion of power, according to which there is no central organising principle, and a comprehensive analytic overview is impossible. From this perspective it is difficult to recommend the university as guide or bastion of progress.

The paradox here is that a world university built from these analytic principles must also recognise the impossibility of a fully equalised and rational public realm. It cannot assume that a population will assemble at its gates, willing and uniformly able to listen to its deliberately humble pronouncements. Because of the dispersion of power, according to which power never disappears and never becomes irrelevant, the world university should not allow itself to become a fabrication of calm above the unequal realities that persist below. It should become directly engaged in those realities in a way that combines its self-critical awareness, with political commitment.

In this paradox there is a very real dilemma. As an anti-utopian mode of analysis, suspicious of grand schemes and reductive thought, the Foucauldian approach generates great insight. However, at the same time as it perceives power operating in realms hitherto neglected by critical thought, it preaches withdrawal and caution due to the anti-utopian dimension that generated its analytic strength in the first place.

It seems that fresh thinking is required in order to resolve this dilemma where there are two major issues that need to be resolved. (1) How can one of the most influential diagnostic tools currently in use be tied to future-oriented thought? (2) How can this be done without denying the very insights and strengths of the Foucauldian approach that have generated this problem? The task is a vast and complex one, and I will not attempt to resolve it here. I wish only to suggest that it is necessary to deal with this problem of utopia head on if research dominated by Foucauldian perspectives can hope to offer alternative visions. Only then will we be able to combine a detailed critique of what the university is becoming with a worthwhile vision of what it might otherwise be. As a mode of critique the Foucauldian approach has already proved itself, as a source of invention it remains untapped.

Notes

1. Wherever possible, each reference refers to date of first publication. The publication date of the consulted text can be found in the bibliography at the end of each reference.
References


