

Thematic Article



Higher education, social change and policy

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Abstract

Higher education has been often seen as an essential contributor to a positive social change and as such attracts the attention from donor agencies as well as charitable foundations, such as for example Open Society Foundations. However, as higher education appears by its very design as a predominantly conservative institution with significant interests of its own to defend, in order to survive and perpetuate itself, its track record initiating and sustaining social change through education, research and policy studies remains at its best mixed. This paper takes a critical look at higher education and the primary mission granted to it by the nation state to stabilize the reality, in search for possible entries to contribute to social change and the conditions under which this could take place. The author argues that left alone, university is likely to frustrate many expectations society might have for the goods to emerge from it.

Keywords: university, social change, cooling-out function, public policy, social institutions, hermeneutic contradiction.

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Introduction

Before starting dissecting the great institution of higher learning, scrutinizing its possible links to social change and not necessarily entirely uncontroversial connections to public policy, I feel obliged to state just briefly on which grounds I claim any competence exploring such rather complicated matters.

For twenty years two months and two weeks I worked for Open Society Foundations' (OSF) Higher Education Support Program (HESP) in their Budapest and London offices. The most significant part of the work HESP did during that time was related to reforming systems of higher education in the formerly communist countries of the Central-East Europe and the former Soviet Union (CEE-fSU). That work covered various areas – supporting institutional reforms through founding a number of independent graduate schools as well as liberal arts colleges, supporting student-driven initiatives towards creating inclusive higher education environments as well as exposing corruption in higher education institutions, supporting faculty development.

At around 2007 I became for a few years rather heavily involved in Nepal, mostly related to founding an independent social science graduate training institution in Kathmandu. My last works in the Foundation took me to the Middle-East and North Africa, particularly Palestine and Tunisia. The latter case being particularly fruitful thinking about possible shortcomings of a rather well functioning system of higher education in terms of contributing to building a better world beyond its own confines.

The past few months have allowed me taking a few steps back from the day-to-day grant-making, reflecting upon the past two decades of work, taking a deeper look at some of the relevant literature and pondering where would one go from here. That is, leaving all the rhetoric – political and other – aside, how would one think about supporting higher education for the purposes of building a better world? Indiscriminately subsidizing a large and to a significant degree entertainment-oriented industry is likely to deliver too little and far too late to make the planet Earth even a slightly more friendly place for any greater share of human beings.

I.

Since its early days of support to higher education OSF took a rather radical position that we did not fund higher education related projects for the narrow purposes of higher education, but that the ends of it should reach further. The exact expected impact of such work continues to be discussed, as it cannot ever be set in stone, as well as are the strategic dimensions of the project work that would allow reaching the desirable impact.

Declaring explicitly the ends of higher education support being beyond education was a rather bold position back then, as it is now. Leaders from Vladimir Lenin to Tony Blair have declared their goals in terms of “Education, education, education.” What exactly that might entail I will discuss a little later. It would suffice to state here that for the reasons good or otherwise, critical work on education proves often rather difficult as so many hopes and expectations have been invested in it. At the same time, higher education has over the past 20-25 years grown into a large international service industry and there are good reasons to think that without adequate critical engagement with it and mechanisms of accountability, the high expectations of many towards it will most likely remain profoundly frustrated.

In the UK for example higher education constitutes the largest export industry of the entire economy, second only to the financial service sector. Other countries are trying to learn from that experience. Currently popular rankings and league tables arrange universities and even countries in a global hierarchy, where those positioned higher take over market shares from those positioned lower. I have, for example seen attempts by some of FSU countries not known for their exceptional transparency attracting fee-paying medical students from the countries with a particularly high demand.

Twenty-five years ago when I entered higher education as a professional, British higher education had set before itself a lofty goal of one third of the young people entering higher education. This was considered back then as a particularly high aim. Twenty-five years later 1/3rd of the young people globally enter post-secondary education. In many lower-middle income countries higher education participation rates are reaching 50%, meaning that talking in terms of Martin Trow (1974), higher education is becoming universal globally. How much is this delivering in terms of economic, social or even cultural development remains open. Whether higher education constitutes the horse or the cart of economic development is the question James Murphy asked back in 1993, and still remains open.

Social change is also not necessarily a simple concept. On the one hand, change is happening anyway, or as Sun Tsu put it “If you wait by the river long enough, the bodies of your enemies will float by.” The following picture may illustrate this approach:



Picture 1. A non-policy policy in higher education and beyond¹⁵.

On the other hand, however, quite often governments may find themselves in a situation where, because of the lack of the resources or political disagreements, no policy can agree upon. But that does not mean that the status quo will be maintained. “Non-policy policy” has all the characteristics of a policy and has its consequences, including the non-intended ones (Tomusk, 2004b). So it happened for example in the 1990s in CEE-fSU countries that many universities floated down the river Lethe with their bellies up.

Be as it may, social change is complex issue, which we have been discussing in various contexts for many years. Some suggest that we should be talking about a “positive social change” in order specify what exactly we have in our minds. The issue here, however, is that most likely there is no such thing as universally accepted *positive* social change. What somebody sees as positive may well appear as something else to somebody else. Policies are fundamentally about re-distributing resources always limited. What constitutes the higher common good should remain open and discussed by each and every generation. Trying to fix this would most likely constitute the very end of the open society. Perhaps it would be one of the main responsibilities of higher education to cultivate such a spirit of openness to the next generation and pass on the culture of within the confines of which this can be practiced.

II.

Talking about social change, one might indeed wonder about the reasons for this being so closely related to higher education. After all, talking about the university institution - historically it has served more the cause of social conservation rather than social change. Suffices to return to Magna Charta of European University, as it was signed back in 1088 by some 350 rectors of European universities in Bologna, as they were strategically

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/maxvenator/status/648894850679603200>

positioning higher education on the map of the emerging European Union, to replace the previous structure of the European Communities through the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. Magna Charta declares as the first among its fundamental principles:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by means of research and teaching.

It is worth noting that the university's fundamental mission as seen here would be more about handing down humankind's historical learning experience than that of actively shaping social or political structures. As a matter of fact – university connections to social and political structures do not appear at all in such fundamental documents, which obviously plays it directly to the hands of those critical of university's reproducing the structures of inequality and injustice rather than challenging these. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, would be one of the key scholars whose works should be mentioned in the latter context. Were one to follow the French line of thought more closely, one could even suggest following Luc Boltanski (see e.g. Boltanski, 2014), the task the nation state has charged university with is not so much about changing or even criticizing the state and the society than manufacturing, spreading and stabilizing *the reality*. Such a proposition would raise many interesting questions, such as for example what happens when the role of the master is being transferred from the nation state to the market under the regime of the World Trade Organization or, indeed - to a supra-national entity such as the European Union. Although fascinating, discussing these issues would reach well beyond the purposes of the current discourse.

The power that has boosted university to the current heights has been predominantly generated by another institution - that of *science*. Although *science* being practiced in many organizational settings, such as research institutes, think-tanks and other third-sector organizations also known as NGO's, in contemporary societies university by and large serves as the most significant host of *science*, receiving a significant share of its own mystical powers as a social institution from it (Tomusk, 2003).

It is science that allows universities to make claims for universality, often being traced back to the CUDOS principles inspired by works of Robert Merton, suggesting science being based on the principles of communalism, universalism, disinterestedness and organized skepticism.

For our purposes it would be significant to notice that some of these principles most likely stand in tension with some of the expectations democratic societies have for the university looking for diverse ways of knowing, such a feminist epistemologies, indigenous knowledge, positive support to the diversity of identities and irreducible richness of lived human experience. On the other hand we also see university being used

in service to strictly national political and cultural interests. The latter being particularly played out in Europe where the nation states, referring to the EU's subsidiarity principle, have refused granting European Union a mandate regarding higher education, to a significant degree to the detriment of building a common European public sphere.

One may suggest that university finds itself in a rather difficult spot in contemporary societies. As an institution with a significant control over the reproduction of social structures, it has the potential of having a significant say in changing those structures or even the potential to disrupt them. However, to be painfully honest, the later potential is hardly ever being used. Much of its institutional power is being derived from *science* that would see any political engagement as a compromise to its abstract universalistic claims, while behind the scenes it runs its own politics not always entirely selfless and innocent (see e.g. Sidley, 2015). University has growing so large and made so many promises in so many directions that it is experiencing increasing difficulties maintaining internal consistency. I would suggest that while university represents a significant potential to support social change and indeed appears critical as an institution with the potential to maintain the openness of the horizons of our existence, it cannot do it by being left to its own devices. It has to be constantly taken to the account of those expectations - to the extent we collectively wish university to carry these out.

III.

As higher education has been expanding globally over the past 20-25 years, it has become the institution to initiate middle classes into independent adult life. However, increasingly so, higher education has also taken on the function of absorbing significant numbers of young people for whom societies cannot identify rewarding and satisfying roles to play. In that sense higher education functions, as Burton Clark suggested back in 1960, as a cooling-out device in which the expectations for better and rewarding future are being slowly but surely put at rest (Clark, 1960).

Thinking about finding a place for the young people's societies appear unable to offer rewarding opportunities, two other institutions come to mind – that of the penitentiary and the military. Military service has indeed served for a long time as the way to initiate particularly young men into the adulthood. Professionalizing the business of waging a war has, however, rendered the conscript armies made of untrained late teenagers largely useless.

One of the countries where I have recently worked offers a rather remarkable example of the university-penitentiary nexus. That country has developed a large higher education system within a weak national economy. The only sector, offering graduates rewarding employment are the foreign-funded NGOs with a rather limited number of job openings. The alternative available to the graduates would be to leave the country

altogether, although the complicated international scene and visa regimes put serious limits on that option. Despite this, higher education has been expanding rapidly for some twenty years, one of the main reasons for that being that having large numbers of young people roaming on the streets and throwing stones at the security forces perceived as unfriendly, would most likely interrupt the fragile development the county and lead to violence. Although the calculation here appears rather different from that of the usual rate of the returns assessment, the solution, at least in a short term, is still being perceived as the best among those available. There are those, however, who suggest that such a disregard to students' own investment into their education and the opportunity cost paid is likely to backfire sooner or later. The 1,300 disillusioned Tunisian university students who left reportedly the country in 2015 to fight for the Islamic State in Syria (MEMO, 2015) may caution against the not entirely thought through policies of higher education.

IV.

As the sector keeps expanding and the burden of it grows on the purses of the nations, particularly those of lower-middle and low income, where expectations are high in terms of a higher education degree serving as a ticket to the social mobility elevator or out to a country with a higher standard of living, the cost of it needs to be justified. As Figure 1 indicates, this is increasingly being done in terms of the economic growth and development linked back to higher education.

Justifying expanding the higher education sector on the grounds of the economic growth it is expected to feed has been, at least by some of the commentators, perceived as problematic since at least the 1990s (see e. g. Murphy, 1993). It is being argued that expanding economy allows more young people the privilege to benefit from higher education and, in a way, from the extension of childhood by another three or four years. This, however, is not an argument that would necessarily please the taxpayers paying for that privilege. That particularly in countries that offer higher education free of charge. Offering higher education free of charge means, as rule, redistributing public revenue to the benefit of those better-off – young people from families representing higher cultural, social and economic capital who enjoy access to higher education as opposed to the entire population, a half or more of which do not have that access. To justify its cost, higher education must demonstrate its value to the society, which it is indeed doing with a great degree of passion, reaching as far as at times censoring any critical voices, including those within its own ranks. We know, for example, that in some UK universities students have been instructed that giving unenthusiastic feedback on their learning experience is likely to lead the decline of the university's reputation and with this the value of the degrees of the graduates, diminishing their employment opportunities (Gill, 2008).

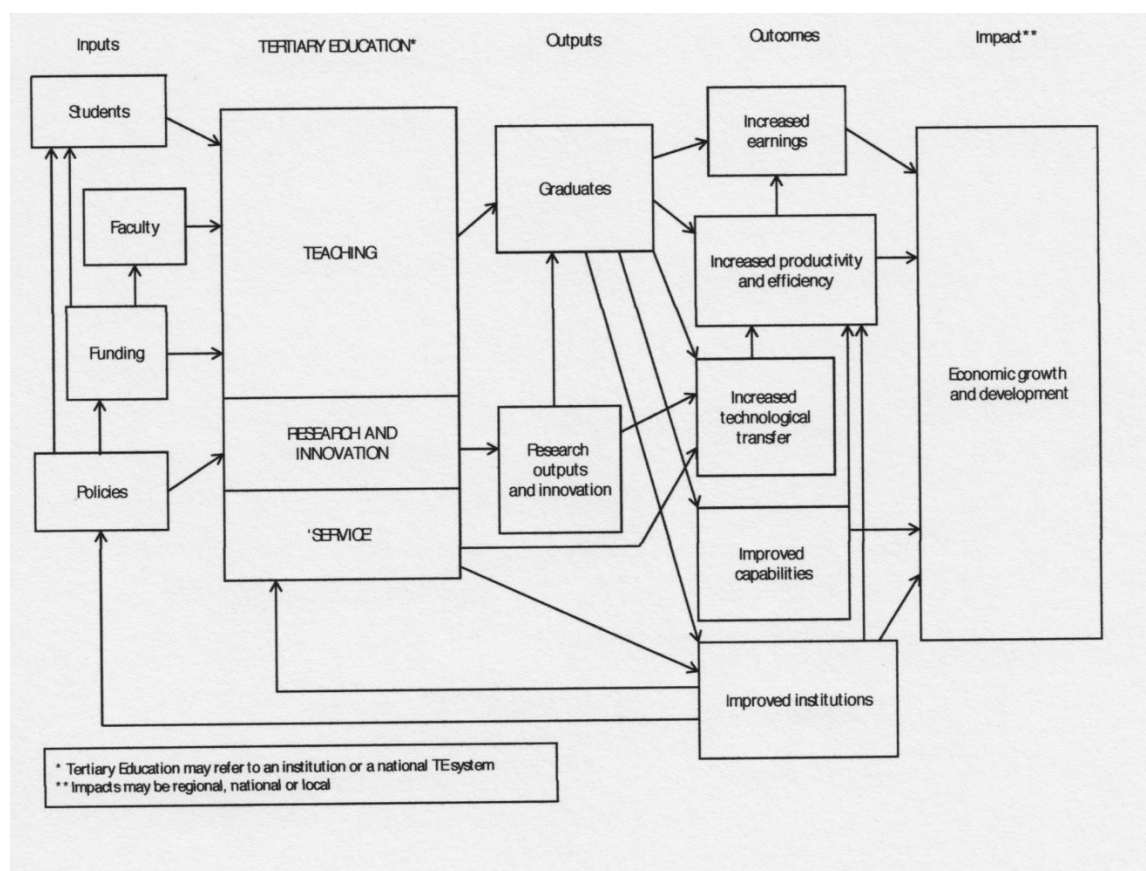


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of higher education impact (Oketch et al., 2014)

As higher education participation rates are rapidly reaching 50% in lower-middle and low-income countries, the argument of higher education providing access to highly qualified well-paid jobs no longer stands. Such jobs are not available to the growing cohorts of university graduates. University graduates, instead of occupying highly qualified jobs drive individuals representing lower levels of formal education downwards on the employment hierarchy or altogether out of it. But in even in the world better known to us – aren't we all aware of holders of PhDs in social sciences even from the very best of the universities are a year after graduation still working in the copy room, proving often too expensive to be hired as a school teachers?

In that world the argument of higher education leading to a marginal increase of labor productivity justifying the better pay no longer stands. Some, such as Simon Marginson for example, argue that the problem stands well beyond the competence of higher education:

What higher education cannot do on its own, despite the supply-side promise of human capital theory, is expand the number of high value positions, so as to enable expanded mobility into middle and upper echelons of society (Marginson, 2015).

My own view on the matter is that higher education declaring its inability to deliver according to its promises acts irresponsibly. They either should figure it out – for example how graduates from higher education would be capable becoming job creators creating jobs for themselves and one or two of their friends, instead of consuming the benefits of the economic growth not happening and jobs not available – by taking a cue from people like Matthew Crawford (Crawford, 2009), or somebody should take them to the account on the grounds other than the dubious self-serving “policy” research.

Marginson (2015) suggests that “Educational research cannot identify the alchemy by which sub-elite credentials can be turned into gold.” Perhaps somebody should disclose to the public the true nature of these degrees then. If higher education is about the offspring off the affluent classes experimenting with their independent living – this should be made known; if it is about absorbing social and political tensions and “cooling-out” the expectations of the excluded and underrepresented – that should be put on the table too, even if it threatens the industry’s interests. If the only lesson in democracy students learn is about collectively choosing the drinks for a party – is the price of the education really worth it? By the end of the day, that latter decision, reached democratically or otherwise, does not carry much of significance after midnight anyway.

The promises of higher education offering social mobility to the excluded and underrepresented groups remain mostly undelivered, except it is being done by the very best universities with a comprehensive student support available. Widening access to second or third-rate universities provides precious little in terms of social justice, turning instead into *cooling-out* of hopes and expectations as argued above. Arum and Roksa (2011) have for example demonstrated that over 40 % of the students in four-year colleges learn pretty much nothing during their first two years of study and that later they learn even less. Meanwhile the inequality gap is widening. Those lagging behind at the entry lag even more behind later. It seems to be the case that while lip-service is being paid to the agenda of social justice, there is a high degree of reluctance to invest into making it a success. One may agree with Teichler (Teichler, 2015) that distributing skills for equally will, independently of the reputational value of the particular credentials, lead towards a more democratic society. There are, however, two further concerns here: (i) it may require a rather long waiting for the benefits to accumulate over generations; and (ii) one cannot be certain how much in terms of real tangible skills some of these colleges actually provide.

Social change seen from the point of view of education can be seen through Nancy Frazer's prism of recognition and redistribution (Frazer & Honneth, 2003). I would argue that the potential of social change this framework offers remains rather limited. Redistribution being offered in terms of widening access to low quality and low relevance sub sectors of higher education fails to deliver. Recognition, which I tend to see more as a matter of curriculum policy, stands in tension with some of the ideologies of Science, finding feminist and indigenous epistemologies as problematic.

Science is the religion of our times and research is appreciated for its redeeming power. Science appears, however, as massively overreaching for its promises, as well as confining university in a rather restrictive intellectual straitjacket. Discussing this at any depth would reach well beyond the purposes of the current discourse and has been provided more competently than the current speaker would be able by others, such as late Paul Feyerabend (see e.g. Feyerabend, 1999, 2011). For the purposes of our occasion I would only suggest that I am rather surprised how African universities have been recently instructed setting-up industry-liaison offices at a considerable cost (AAU-AUCC, 2013) in an utter disregard to the amount of relevant knowledge being produced at the respective universities and industries being mostly absent. It is also known and well documented (see e.g. Tomusk, 2011) that there is considerably less money to be found in the intellectual property rights business than commonly assumed by consultants to the higher education industry.

Regarding research informing better policies, I would like just to remind us about one of the leading European higher education policy researchers, a German sociologist Ulrich Teichler, who after retiring soberly concluded that the one of the main functions of policy research was to provide scientific legitimation to policies already adopted by governments (Teichler, 2003). This constitutes the very opposite of one of the main missions of the intellectuals – telling the truth to the power, looking more like representing power to fellow intellectuals and citizens. The recent mobilization of higher education researchers and consultants implementing Bologna Process and manufacturing legitimacy for it would serve as a remarkable example of the latter (see e.g. Tomusk, 2004).

It is rather common for the academics to scold politicians and policy makers for their lack of interest in their research, allegedly allowing designing policies considerably better. A recent discussion on related matters suggests, however, that informing policies would require policy researchers and advocates being aware of the technicalities of the policy process and the big political issues allowing the context for the interventions as well as presenting narratives catching public attention (Tomusk, 2016). Policy research living in a holy innocence from the political is doomed to remain irrelevant and one

should not blame that only on the politicians. The other extreme – science selling itself off to the political does not, however, appear an option considerably more appealing.

Public engagement is a notion gaining increasing prominence. There are many ways to go about it, widely different for their impact in terms of their cultural, social or perhaps even political change. Recent discussions in the UK suggest that within the academia this is usually reduced to popularizing science and research outcomes among the lay public. While it has a lot to do justifying the public funds spent on research, the agenda does not appear necessarily as unproblematic – those with more purist tastes for the work on the fields of science, even this constitutes nothing short of a waste of precious time and brain resources of the scientific workforce (Moriarty, 2016). Comprehensive agendas for engaged higher education, such as for example exemplified by Bard College remain less than rare. Bard College, New York, has founded an international network of higher education institutions seeing civic engagement as the leading idea of curriculum design as well as the faculty scholarly work, extra- curricular activities and the forming of partnerships with higher education institutions and foundations (Becker, 2015).

The current climate of higher education in its drive towards re-arranging the landscape of higher education in hierarchies based on rather different values does not necessarily reward civic engagement particularly highly, while the challenges such institutions face in terms of the resources required and faculty and administrators' contributions are many.

V.

Following the above it is not at all surprising that those with the courage to look at higher education with their eyes open see a number of conflicts and contradictions and discrepancies between the declarations made and goods being delivered. Some years ago I invited Hans Weiler, a political scientist from Stanford, to give a talk similar to what I am delivering here this morning. He had quite a few things to say about what he saw as the overwhelming ambivalence of the university institution. According to Weiler, university demonstrates ambivalence about a number of issues, among them ambivalence:

- about the relative priority of teaching and research,
- about the proper relationship between the university and the state, or between the university and business,
- about what and whom to include and exclude from the pursuits of the university,
- about how centralized or decentralized the structures of decision-making should be,
- about how democratic or authoritarian a university governance should be,
- about the relative importance of the autonomy of the individual scholar and the autonomy of the institution,
- about the national or international an institution the university should be,

- about how regulated or deregulated the life of the university and its members should be,
- about the importance or obsolescence of disciplines,
- about the relative virtues of the status quo and of change, or of freedom and order (Weiler, 2005: 5-6).

This, one may suggest, shows great inventiveness on behalf of university communities finding ways of, as the old saying goes – *Having ones cake and eating it too*, by means of playing both or all sides there might be. While Weiler suggest university being in inherently ambivalent institution, his analysis suggests it being a rather opportunistic institution, demonstrating little core value beyond its own interests. Those who may still remember the early days, might recall that at one stage such opportunism was explicitly promoted by higher education consultants, teaching universities to become “adaptive and entrepreneurial” (Davies, 1987). A decade later the entire sector had been caught in the fire of entrepreneurialism.

Showing such a degree of ambivalence causes, however, major difficulties taking universities to the account:

It is not difficult to imagine how easily a university could avoid accountability for its results and accomplishments as long as there is ambivalence about exactly what and institution is supposed to accomplish. As long as there is ambivalence about a university’s goals and purposes, it makes little sense to hold it accountable for whether or not it has achieved the goals (Weiler, 2005: 6-7).

While Weiler demonstrates difficulties taking the university institution and higher education as a major global industry to the account, his analysis offers little in terms of identifying a conceptual path along which constructive criticism could be provided.

Needless to say that the latter is not necessarily an easy matter, requiring some courage to walk roads beyond the current mainstream higher education discourse walled with defensive rhetoric under the disguises from the core values of *Science* all the way to human rights (Tomusk, 2011).

VI.

Russian writer Viktor Pelevin (2003) in his essay “Macedonian Critique of the French Thought” argues that there is a particular trick French intellectuals play on their reader – that the reader is almost being convinced that there is a point to those verbal constructions, and only at a very close look finds out that there is none.

It is therefore with a degree of hesitation one resorts to the French social thought in a search of a scalpel to further dissect the university institution. The need for identifying

further instruments becomes, however, urgent as the Anglo-Saxon naivety of perception, bordering with the very denial of the existence of the institutions as *bodiless beings* controlling a significant portion of human behavior, hits the wall trying to gain traction in understanding social processes.

According to Young, institutions are “recognized practices consisting of easily identifiable roles, coupled with collection of rules or conventions governing relations among the occupants of these roles” (quoted in: DiMaggio & Powell, 1991: 8).

According to Luc Boltanski:

An institution is a bodiless being to which is delegated the task of stating of whatness of what it is (Boltanski, 2012: 75).

While the existence of institutions as theoretical constructs is easy to question or even deny, their function regulating our daily behavior, hopes and expectations is hard to overestimate. For those having in some way or another benefitted from the mythical powers of the university as an institution – either being an academic or scientist declaring a privileged access to the truth or as a graduate enjoying the powers of a *degree* entering a job interview, the existence of institutions becomes a fact less questionable.

The rather interesting issue Boltanski raises stems from the fact that institutions as bodiless beings cannot talk for themselves. They need human intermediaries, and we cannot ever be entirely certain whose will the person representing an institution conveys – that of the institution – abstract and purified in the centuries of debates, arguments and even at times violent clashes and revolutions, or that of a potentially corrupt human being:

But the problem is that, when it has no body, this being cannot speak, at least other than by expressing itself the intermediary of spokespersons ... (Boltanski, 2012: 84).

Out of this grows the phenomenon which Boltanski calls the *hermeneutic contradiction* – the difficulty of distinguishing the voice of an *institution* as a pure bodiless being from the voices of its *spokespersons* – bodied human beings tainting the will of the institutions with their own interests and expectations. For example, when a renowned scientist acting as a spokesperson of the university declares to the public how additional funding would allow the university solving most of not all the problems contemporary societies face, one may find it difficult indeed to draw a line between the voice of the bodiless, disinterested institution, the interests of the higher education industry and those of the speaker as human being worrying about their job security and income. I would suggest

that a great deal of interesting critical work could be done by dissecting the map of ambivalences offered by Weiler, using the concept of the *hermeneutic contradiction*. The fact that we can never be quite certain whose voice we hear offers, however, a powerful instrument to take institutions and their spokespersons to the account.

It is particularly the voice of Science that is in our days caught in the hermeneutic contradiction. I suggested earlier how evidence based policy could easily become policy based (manufacturing of the) evidence (Tomusk, 2016). Ashis Nandy explains:

As more and more areas of life are 'scientized' and taken out of the reach of participatory politics to be handed over to experts, the universities as the final depository of expertise have become a major global political actor of our times. In addition to their other tasks, they legitimize the 'expertization' of public affairs and the reign of the professionals (Nandy, 2000: 116).

It is particularly relevant for our purposes, as Boltanski argues, following Bruno Latour, how *Science* is actually monopolizing critical intellectual work while declaring it being beyond the grasp of lay public (Boltanski, 2012: 123). This would allow Science to play it both ways – declaring the contemporary society complex beyond the comprehension of the regular education public and building close loops with policy makers offering its own interests as evidence based policies or confirming the wisdom of certain political circles, groups or individuals on allegedly “scientific” grounds.

University, through its massive expansion, has gained a huge amount of interest of its own. For some decades after WWII it grew into a very nice and civilized place to be with an unprecedented job security and lots of flexibility, absorbing, among the others, significant numbers of upwardly mobile former members of working classes (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996). It is therefore with a degree of unease that one realizes many of the recent voices raising in defense of the university or defense of the humanities or in defense of other possibly great values, that what is on stake are not those values, but the privileges of the privileged.

In its aspirations to dominate the domain of critical thought, science meanwhile is massively overreaching. A recent paper “The Normative Insignificance of Neuroscience” by Selim Barker (Barker, 2009) demonstrates how science tries to resolve issues that belong to the political domain of fundamental matters of human social life. However, reaching to the bottom of such cases and finding there not *Science*, but personal ideologies of the particular scientists, requires hard work and a great degree of professional scientific competence.

It is within the confines of the university where the voice of *Science* is claiming to possess knowledge, possibly all of it, and various political interests meet. While

historically there have been other competing voices there, such as for example that of the Roman Catholic Church and the Nation State trying to express themselves through the university, it is increasingly the managers who try to control the voice of the university, at least as long as a scientist has not raised the research funds considered sufficient to occupy the stage and talk. I do believe that it is absolutely essential for the university communities – students as well as the faculty to exercise their critical faculties distinguishing between the voices, acknowledge that there are fundamental issues concerning human beings living with each other science can never resolve, and that therefore need to be discussed and agreed upon among each generation. On the one hand, it is the voice of *science* that threatens open society with a radical closure on the scientific grounds. But what may actually be well the case is that instead of the voice of science, politics is entering the conversation under the latter's disguise.

Declaring university as a radically apolitical institution may well lead to a situation similar to that in the Soviet Union, where *Historical and Dialectical Materialism* was the scientific discipline of the highest importance and every student took a course in *Scientific Communism*. Alternatively, it may easily become an institution of creating economic value only, where all other values, including those of human lives, freedom and dignity are being reduced to their cash value, reminding me a recent discussions in the House of Commons, where after two hours of discussions on the possible impact of BREXIT on British higher education the only European value identified was the £ 580 M UK universities receiving annually from EU in research funding, money frankly insignificant for a sector of such size.

VII.

Moving towards bringing it all together, I would argue that there is a significant amount of critical work for university communities to do that would indeed support social change as well as prepare students to make a contribution to building open societies – keeping these open for their own lifetime and handing the same ethos over to the next generation.

I would see it happening under the heading of “accountability”, taking to the account:

- the political classes,
- the institutions of university and science,
- the spokespersons of those institutions – scientists and intellectuals.

University communities taking political classes to the account is not an uncontroversial proposition. I have seen deeply politically divided campuses in Nepal leading to very destructive outcomes, such as explosions and burnt down libraries; I have also seen clashes between the Islamist and Secularist student activists in Tunisia. But there are also cases such as the student reaction to the kidnapping of students in Iguala, Mexico, in

September 2014, where students occupied campuses and read aloud the names of each of the 43 students kidnapped by the police and handed over to a criminal militia for killing, until the perpetrators were arrested and taken to justice¹⁶.

Universities fall often short of their promises and, as Weiler has suggested, taken university to the account may be a rather complicated matter. I do believe that students can possibly play a significant role here. Historically Higher Education Support Program of OSF has worked for example with the Anti-Corruption Student Network in South-East Europe taking universities to the account on issues of corruption – nepotism, bribery and others all they way on the misuse of public funding.

Critically analyzing the discourses manufactured by academics and intellectuals is perhaps even a more complex matter. To demonstrate Science overreaching in its claims requires a high degree of professional competence, but still needs to be done to avoid what Feyerabend called “the tyranny of science”. But it is also about the value science, particularly social sciences being practiced. Jacques Ranciere in his critique of Pierre Bourdieu as a “sociologist king” argues for example how the allegedly critical work of the guru does deliver precious little in terms of a social change, quoting along the lines Bourdieu himself:

The sociologist would be, generally, the scientist [savant] and physician of self-denial. By not changing the ranking of the lowly ranked, he would give them ‘the possibility of taking on their habitus without guilt or suffering’ (Ranciere, 2004).

As opposed to this comes Michael Burawoy’s *public sociology* program:

The recognition of public sociology must extend to the organic kind, which often remains invisible and private and is often considered to be apart from our professional lives. The project of such public sociology is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life (Burawoy, 2007: 28-29).

“Who would be interested in a sociology for sociology’s sake (in the way people refer to ‘art for art’s sake’)” asks Boltanski,

– that is to say, a sociology, which exhausting itself in ever more sophisticated and meticulous descriptions, has no other objective than its own fulfillment as a discipline of knowledge? The processes through which the actors in social life constitute the wholes of which they form part, and cause them to last or subvert them, are themselves articulated, in large measure, with the possibility of critique,

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Iguala_mass_kidnapping

not only when they challenge the existing orders, but also when they are led to justify them (Boltanski, 2012: 17-18)

In doing so, our aim is, as Boltanski suggests “to help society – that is, people, the people who are called ‘ordinary’ - deliberately maintain themselves in the state of constant imbalance in the absence of which, as the direct prophecies announce, domination would in fact seize hold of everything” (Boltanski, 2012: 160). The price of open society is imbalance. Security secured by some for themselves, including the spokespersons of some of the great institutions, comes at the cost of a doom for many – socially, economically and otherwise. There are many open questions regarding university engaging with society and society with university, however, as the world stands – disengaged university makes little sense, neither would it be productive to leave university solely in the mercy of the political classes or the neoliberal markets.

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