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The University as the Bringer of Hope: A Scaffolding for the Future

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ABSTRACT

In this text, our aim is to outline the scaffolding we believe is needed to build and shape the future role of the University. This scaffolding is an assemblage of three different strategies we have found to be fruitful in our attempt to present narratives for a better future: engagement with the arts, the development of sociological imagination, and the embracement of the Other, specifically in terms of alternative and different ways of organizing.

KEYWORDS

Alternative organizing; humanities; liquid modernity; university

We live in liquid times as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) expressed it: a society destabilized and made indefinite; centered not on institutions of sociality but on the autonomous individual and almighty markets. One of the institutions that used to be solid and even taken for granted – the University, has become so unstable that it has forfeited its identity. It used to be a sanctuary for contemplation and curiosity, as well as an independent guarantor of democracy and solid knowledge claims, firmly safeguarding us from hollow arguments, falsifications and history revisionism. Now it has not only lost the societal position it used to occupy, but its relevance and meaning are becoming fuzzy, and in certain parts of the world even colonized by business logic. The value of academic education is increasingly being questioned, knowledge claims are being...
relativized and politicized, and research results are only considered to be of any value if they are deemed useful, either by adding surplus economic value to flourishing markets or responding to narrowly defined societal challenges. Universities are rapidly losing raison d’être (Docherty, 2015).

In our liquid times the University appears to be a hopeless enlightenment project, a catch 22 of conflicting ideals and interests that tends to keep university employees in a stalemate. Burdened as they are by New Public Management, rankings, the hunt for citations and intensified competition for research funding, disillusion – not to say alienation – is spreading in the university corridors. The slogan “publish or perish” has for many become “publish and perish.” Many develop coping strategies based on escapism or unreflexive adaptation. Others, those who are perhaps more prone to reflexivity, tend to be increasingly alienated from their work and workplaces. Human energies are used either to evade reality or to adapt at whatever cost it takes. Maybe the university has degenerated beyond recognition or ready remedy (Ginsberg, 2011)? Indeed, academics seem to be losing a war waged against their profession (Docherty, 2015), even if they are still often aware of “what universities are for” and that it is a social mission distinctly different from the business strategies their universities tend to adopt (Collini, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new powerful turning point.

Edgar Morin (2020) proposes this moment can be regarded as a fundamental systemic crossroads. It entails both an imperative and a possibility to change the path – or it perpetuates humanity on the road to extinction. This is also a moment for reflection: it teaches us important lessons about the human condition, our lives and our civilization.

We believe that the role of the University is part of these lessons and, furthermore, it still is, and should be, a hopeful project: the University and university employees play a crucial role in forming better future societies. This role is not necessarily about carving out the future institutions that should be on the other side of the turning point, or designing the strategies that take us over the abyss we are facing, nor is it about instilling hope in and through new research findings. Instead, we see the role of the University as a crucial matter of creating hope in society that can be instrumental in the mission to change track, changer de voie (Morin, 2020). In order to build new viable institutions and institutional orders, we need to critically examine what has been, but above all, we need to rethink the very basis for our previous thinking and actions. If we are to build something previously unseen and unthought-of, we should not only have access to new and different ideas – the scaffolding itself must also be fundamentally rethought.

In this text, our aim is to outline the scaffolding we believe is needed to build and shape the future role of the University. This scaffolding is an
assemblage of three different strategies we have found to be fruitful in our attempt to present narratives for a better future (cf. Ericsson & Kostera, 2019): engagement with the arts, the development of sociological imagination (Mills, 1961), and the embracement of the Other, specifically in terms of alternative and different ways of organizing.

**Engagement with the Arts**

Perhaps the most ample evidence of the crisis of the identity of the University is the development of “the business school” and its increasingly central position within universities all over the world. On one hand, this development is a matter of material power and influence: In many countries business administration has – at the expense of other disciplines – developed into being the largest subject in terms of both research and enrollment of students (HESA, 2018). On the other hand, this development is a matter of symbolic hegemony: “the business school’s” notion of *homo economicus* has been put on the socio-cultural pedestal of the University. A very narrow and instrumental understanding of what it means to be human is disseminated, which is not only untrue but plainly harmful (Parker, 2018). Business schools brings fame and fortune to the universities, but it comes with some troublesome costs (Thompson, 1970).

The critique toward this development of “the business school” has indeed been harsh, and several remedies of the situation at hand have been proposed. One line of thought is to open up the business schools for philosophies and theories from the humanities and the social sciences (see e.g. Orzechowski, 1999; Pirson et al., 2009, 2014), thus challenging the socio-cultural hegemony at the University, so to speak, from within the business schools. Another line of thought is to break the instrumentalism and economic rationality by introducing emancipatory and critical approaches (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Clegg & Haugaard, 2009).

Such lines of thought, however, are rather precarious if not accompanied by a fundamental systemic shift: a break with the positivist assumptions that define the very purpose of the business school, and consequently the University, in terms of delivering objective facts and universal tools to maximize economic (or social) value to students and other stakeholders. Without such a shift the alternative philosophies and pedagogies are reduced to “add-ons,” “white- and green-washes” that reproduce the status quo instead of challenging existing material and symbolic orders.

A more fruitful path to thread upon in this regard, as we envision it, is to replace “the business school” as the centerpiece of the University with the arts, and to fully acknowledge the humanistic stance embedded
in artistic works, practices, relations, and experiences. This stance stand in sharp contrast to “the business school” and its accompanying focus on economic rationality, objectivity, linear reasoning, prediction, and control. Instead of reducing and delimiting humans to solitary market agents seeking to maximize their utility, the arts interrogate the human condition: it seek to stretch the boundaries of human expression into the unexpected and unknown by illuminating the things taken-for-granted in life. Contrary to the simplistic type of knowledge appropriated by “the business school,” knowledge-making within the arts thrive upon a completely different type of ethic: it is a matter of (inter)subjectivity, holistic understanding, historical and contextual awareness, and it is a matter of cultivating an interpretative sensitivity toward life’s subtleties and the sublime.

The plea for making the arts into the University centerpiece is by no means revolutionary. It is rather a plea for returning to old and proven pathways for knowledge, trampled upon from ancient Greece via the Bildung tradition of the 19th Century to a growing present day interest in the liberal arts tradition. In this sense, our plea could be understood as a resurrection of something once lost under the yoke of capitalism – but something that is still there, although existing in the margins of society. That something is part of our history, or rather, it is our history – and as such, it must be part of our future.

That art must be part of our future and that engagement with the arts seems to be an indispensable scaffolding for thinking – and writing – about the future became clear to us when working with the anthology project Organizing hope – Narratives for a better future (Ericsson & Kostera, 2019). Almost all of the contributors to the book turned to the arts for narrative inspiration and arguments, and they did so more or less unintendedly or subconsciously. For some, the relation to the arts is explicitly empirical: Marta Polec (2019), for instance, writes about street artists, Agata Morgan (2019) takes an interest in murals, and Daniel Ericsson (2019) studies so-called “house concerts”. However, for most of our coauthors, the arts also form an integral part of their reasoning and narrative enactments. In an eclectic manner, our coauthors write on the virgule between scientific facts and artistic fictions, as if there were no distinction between the two – and as if they were inextricably intertwined, like two sides of the same coin. Authors and artists such as Ursula Le Guin, Emily Dickinson, Hesiodos, Vilhelm Moberg, Vaclav Havel, Bernard Mandeville and Patti Smith are invited – alongside of renowned researchers and philosophers – to partake in the narrative construction of an alternative and hopefully better future. To our mind, the artistic presence is simply the fuel of the narrative machine without which it would run dry. It is however not art for art’s
sake that will take us to the other side of the abyss; art mediates our potentials of breaking the deadlock.

**Development of Sociological Imagination**

Engagement with the arts is however not enough to rebuild and reshape the future role of the University that we envision. The University must also be imbued with a capacity for sociological imagination (Mills, 1961): the capacity to see beyond the perspective of everyday life, to question things taken for granted, and to grasp the complexities of social reality, from face-to-face interactions between people to the intricate interrelations between people, organizations, and institutions. Instead of focusing upon particularities and simplistic causes and effects, as present day scientists and economists preferably do, University researchers and teachers of the future (should) focus upon the greater picture and query how it is constituted by all the little things and wonders in life, and vice versa. Because, without such an interest to understand how societies are constructed, it becomes difficult (if not impossible) to fundamentally reform them.

The concept of sociological imagination was coined by Charles Wright Mills back in 1961, as part of his critique of modernity – and of how sociology at the time was dealing with contemporary individual troubles and public issues. Instead of separating the individual from the social, and the private spheres from the public ones, Mills argued for a social science that bridged the gulf between subjective experiences and objective societal structures, as well as between peoples’ personal biographies and the greater historical scene. As we see it, his critique is as valid today, and so is his plea for a new type of social science: Modernity is ever more at a troublesome crossroads, and research within social sciences is still largely devoted to tin-slicing practices.

Sociological imagination is outlined as a propensity to shift perspectives: “from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry” (ibid., p. 14). Shifting perspectives is however only the explicit outcome of the academic position and disposition of the “intellectual craftsman” Mills (ibid., p. 215 ff) advocates. To be able to shift perspective in a productive manner, you need to bring all of your personal life experience to the sociological table, and you need to adopt an attitude of playfulness and empathy toward the construction of social reality. In concrete terms, this means for instance that the researcher needs to place her- or himself in the shoes of a fellow human being, think in extreme or opposite types, and turn cherished theoretical arguments, values and beliefs on their
heads. Sociological imagination is simply all about one’s subjective and historically mediated experiences, and your ability to mobilize these experiences in unforeseen ways, according to Mills: “its essence is the combination of ideas that no one expected were combinable – say, a mess of ideas from German philosophy and British economics” (ibid., p. 233).

Outlined in this manner, sociological imagination can neither be planned for in a linear manner nor controlled (ibid., p. 215 ff). It stands for something genuinely unexpected in terms of both process and product, and it is something that unfolds in an abductive and serendipitous manner. As such, it breaks with traditional notions of science: validity, reliability, and generalizability as scientific dictates is replaced by plausibility and intelligibility – and, we suggest – hope that things can be done differently. Not for nothing, the title of the opening chapter in Mills’ book is “The Promise”.

In the anthology Organizing Hope, sociological imagination is expressed in many different ways. Markus Kallifatides (2019) literally dreams himself away into a future non-capitalist society based on social investments and a responsibility for coming generations; Wendelin Küpers (2019) explores Pandora’s box and based on his findings he conjures up a new and different geological epoch beyond the anthropocene; Anna Goral (2019) fantasizes about a sustainable society based on idealists and dreamers, activists and altruists; John McClellan envisions a future of emancipated workers; Clegg et al. (2019) are hopeful about a future characterized by social and organizational democracy; and Izak and Kostera (2019) imagine that the very capacity for imagination, in itself, leads to a more meaningful and richer social life.

The Embracement of the Other

The University requires more than vision: it needs engagement with the Other. This strategy runs, as we see it, in two different but closely related directions. On one hand, embracement of the Other means the acknowledgement of all social actors that in one way or the other are marginalized in the patriarchal hegemony of the world, both symbolically and materially, and specifically in relation to all things associated with knowledge (see e.g. Ericsson & Monica, 2020). This strategy fundamentally questions the white, heterosexual man as the norm as both knower and subject of knowledge, to which all the Others are both inferior and subjugated, and to which all the Others must orientate themselves. On the other hand, embracement of the Other is about our humanity and in particular, how it does not always follow a strict business logic. This strategy questions growth, profit, return on investment as the overarching organizing principle, and it breaks with the neoliberal market logic that seems to permeate almost every corner of the world. Instead of
reproducing a monolithic theory of organizing, the purpose of the strategy is to promote a diverse and alternative understanding of the complexities of past, present, and future societies.

The strategy of embracing the Other basically means to destabilize some of the power structures that underpin the University in terms of what is considered as a legitimate area of interest for researchers and teachers, and how knowledge is being created. Previously neglected empirical vistas for inquiry emerge, such as the alternative types of organizations Parker (2019) draws attention to, such as producer cooperatives, workers’ funds, local barter systems, social enterprises, separatist groups, anarchists, B-corps, the slow food movement, ecovillages, consumer cooperatives, recycling systems, local currency systems, trade unions, sharing economies, microfinance and so on. And, to understand the difference of the Other in such empirical vistas, disruptive, nonpatriarchal and nonconformist research methods are simultaneously introduced (cf. Ericsson & Monica, 2020).

Above all, however, the strategy of embracing the Other also foresees a new position at the University: the marginal one. Already in the 1930s, Everett Stonequist (1937) drew attention to how life at the margins of society gave rise to a specific (personality) type, the intermediary, who is particularly disposed at transgressing boundaries of different worlds in a productive and most often creative manner. Through familiarity with different worlds, Stonequist (ibid., p. 179) argued, the intermediaries exhibit an internationalist awareness; they act like cosmopolitans who understand and accept different assumptions and values of different cultures, and they do so simply because they have been forced to understand and accept their own cultural marginalization. To our mind, such an intermediary position coupled with an internationalist disposition, should be an academic habitus to strive for, individually as well as on an institutional level. Not only does it represent a prerequisite for the sensitivity needed to embrace the otherness of the Other – it also makes a fertile soil for the cultivation of sociological imagination.

**A Scaffolding for the Future**

We believe that the University is the buffer between the present and possible futures, or, in Thomas Docherty’s (2015) words: "an encounter that generates time or that generates an openness to future possibility, an openness to difference and to change, for the world and our engagements with and in it." (p. 47). In order to build the future, especially, if we are, following Edgar Morin (2020) to change the track, we need a university that will allow for a broad buffering. We believe that it can do so thanks to a scaffolding assembled of three strategies: engagement with the arts,
the development of sociological imagination, and the embrace of the Other.

The arts offer a language for the University that can be used to describe the world beyond the current reductionist mind frame, and especially beyond business. Sociological imagination provides the University with a vision and a mission to recognize complex processes, things and ideas, as well as with an ability to perceive phenomena in a broader context. Engagement with the Other gives the University legitimacy beyond current power structures – anchored in the margins and equipped with a radical social mission to give voice and represent human experiences outside of the hegemonic center. This is not a very original vision of the University; rather, it is a return to the roots of the University based on the ideal of Bildung, but with a string twist away from the center and toward the diverse margins. By thus broadening the scope of knowledge and by expanding social legitimacy through the embracing of the marginalized Other, the University accepts and endorses complexity.

In the current situation of mounting global crisis, there is a great need to face complexity and engage with it. We believe the University is the only major social institution that is able to embark on this process in a systematic way, not just “discovering” complexity but accumulating complex knowledge for use and operationalization. This makes the University an institution of hope understood not as optimism or “positive thinking” but as a firm conviction that another world is possible, other ways of doing things are possible. In that sense, the University as bringer of hope is an institution of acknowledging complexity, perceiving and narrating it, and turning it into an engagement with the Other.

Of course, we do not propose to focus the entire institution entirely on social sciences and the humanities. In the University we envision there is place for natural sciences economics, even for business studies, understood much more broadly than they tend to be today. The point is, however, to reclaim the identity of the University and to renew it, using the scaffolding made up of the three strategies.

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