

Ronald Barnett - II. Democracy,11

11) The specific role of the universities, particularly in their research and in academics becoming 'public intellectuals' - in their powers to reach out into society and help to advance the public sphere and improve the extent of rational decision-making in society.

Ronald Barnett. The general matter is that of universities and the public sphere.

Background:

- rise of populism;
- division - really, a cleavage - in society, in which higher education overtakes class, age, gender, ethnicity as the most influential component of this division;
- witness USA and the UK:
 - the UK had a referendum as to whether it should remain a member of the European Union, with virtually a 50/50 split: whether an individual had experienced higher education (or not) was the most telling factor in shaping the pattern of the votes;
 - families were split on that basis;
 - this cleavage in society is explicable;
 - the world presents individuals with overwhelming complexity: this is both a systems complexity and a discursive 'supercomplexity' (in which the categories through which we attach ourselves to the world are in dispute);
 - this threatens identity and produces a propensity to be mobilised by populist movements ;
 - universities have been partly responsible for producing these forms of complexity, especially discursive complexity.
- However, almost by chance, the dominant kind of higher education that universities have developed turns out to be a brilliant form of human development that enables individuals to cope with all of this complexity (this can also be explained).
- So the social cleavage we see today in many societies - between those who have experienced higher education and those who have not - is explicable. We have a 'culture war' with peoples having fundamentally different holds on the world.
- So universities are entangled in a fundamental split in society.

The public sphere:

- The public sphere is weak;
- and is weakening;
- witness (again) the rise of populism;
- 'we've had enough of experts' (UK senior politician);

- populist movements attack universities (a long list of such countries can be named very easily);
- the emergence of 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts'.

Responsibilities of universities:

- If the public sphere is to be developed, universities have a role to play;
- informing public debate;
- helping society address complex matters;
- and raising the level of public understanding of such complex matters;
- and helping to forge a public sphere inspired by 'the force of the better argument' (Habermas).

In other words:

- unwittingly, the university has played a significant part in bringing about a fundamental schism in society;
- there are profound levels of ignorance and dogmatism (the French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler, speaks of societal and even global 'stupidity');

Questions:

- Is it generally agreed that universities have a responsibility:
- to play a part in helping society to become more rational?
- to help to enable members of society to live with uncertainty?
- and to cope with disagreement and diversity of views?

But then:

- what possibilities are there for the university to do much of this?
- doesn't it call for a fundamental change in the idea of the university - neither focused on truth as such, but turning to society (not the economy) to play a constructive part in bringing about a wiser society?
- is this not problematic for universities, for it means a new conception of knowledge - of knowledge for 'wisdom' (Maxwell) ?
- but it also calls for universities to see themselves as having responsibilities towards society as such and be active in helping to bring about this more thoughtful society.

Only so are we going to be able to face up to the global challenges in front of the Earth.

[PS: These are crude notes - please see some of my books in particular, eg 'The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia' (2018); (with Soren Bengtsen), 'Knowledge and the University: Re-claiming Life' (in press); 'Realising the University in an age of supercomplexity' (2000) and 'A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty' (2005). Also, in press, an article of mine: 'University Challenge: Division, Discourse and Democracy' in the journal Postdigital Science and Education.]

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