

## Chapter 6

# Beyond liberalism and the free market: The future of higher education

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### ABSTRACT

In this chapter we begin by defending two aims which we believe are fundamental to higher education: the development of critical thinking and the fostering of theoretical diversity. In the second section we turn to the two models of university life which have been prevalent in New Zealand at one time or another. Up until recently the 'idea of a university' which prevailed in most countries of the western world, including New Zealand, was informed by the 'liberal' tradition of education. The main concerns of universities from this point of view were the cultivation of the intellect, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the custodianship of culture. This tradition is now being displaced by a model of university life which judges the worth of education and research according to vocational or commercial criteria. The aim of this section is not to provide a fully fledged alternative for universities but to attempt to redefine the parameters of debate by examining the extent to which these models support or undermine the fundamental aims noted above.

In the previous chapter we dealt with the attacks on tenure and the tradition of collegiality in universities. In our concluding remarks we noted that the current round of reforms is underpinned by certain assumptions about the nature and function of higher education. In this chapter we begin by defending two aims which we believe are fundamental to higher education: the development of critical thinking and the fostering of theoretical diversity.

In the second section we turn to the two models of university life which have been prevalent in New Zealand at one time or another. Up until recently the 'idea of a university' which prevailed in most countries of the western world, including New Zealand, was informed by the 'liberal' tradition of education. The main concerns of universities from this point of view were the cultivation of the intellect, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the custodianship of culture. This tradition is now being displaced by a model of university life which judges the worth of education and research according to vocational or commercial criteria. The aim of this section is not to provide a fully fledged alternative for universities but to attempt to redefine the parameters of debate by examining the extent to which these models support or undermine the fundamental aims noted above.

## Critical thinking and theoretical pluralism

The importance of critical thinking has long been of importance to philosophers of education. John Dewey, for instance, argued for an educational experience that encourages freedom of speech and an interest in perfecting democratic social arrangements. In this view critical thinking was linked inextricably to the effective operation of democracy. Toward the end of the Second World War, and during its aftermath, this notion received new impetus. The experience of Nazi totalitarianism impressed on educationalists the fragility of democratic ideals and practices (*Thomas Report*, 1944:6). From this point of view the overriding duty of schools was to produce students capable of defending and extending the influence of democratic values throughout society. Associated with the liberal tradition, this strand of thought continued to develop well into the 1960s.

One of the more lucid and concise discussions of the nature of critical thinking can be found in Passmore's (1967: 197) discussion of the 'critical spirit.' Passmore distinguishes this form of critical thought from the critical attitude a learner might adopt to his or her own performance. In this instance, the student can be highly critical about the level of competence they have in a particular skill, but nevertheless take for granted the assumptions and norms which gave the performance its social significance in the first place. The critical spirit, by contrast, encourages the student to:

look critically at the value of performances in which he [sic] is taught to engage, as distinct from the level of achievement arrived at within such a performance. It is characteristic of societies in which criticism flourishes and develops that they abandon, under criticism, types of performance; they abandon, let us say, executions as distinct from seeking a higher level of skill in their executioners (Passmore, 1967:198).

In the 1970s, however, it became clear that liberal theories of schooling had been too optimistic about the extent to which education could bring about a more democratic society. Worse still, it became evident that the education system was actually reinforcing class barriers rather than breaking them down. The ensuing critique of liberalism came in the form of an influential corpus of work which attempted, in various ways, to explain the manner in which the educational institutions 'reproduced' the class structure of capitalist societies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). While the writers in this field differ on many important issues, it is evident that they agreed on at least one significant point: that schools could do little more than mirror the interests of the dominant class or culture. In the words of Harris (1979:183), for instance,

education is an instrument of the state, and serves the ruling interests and power elites of the state. Its job is to maintain and stabilise the social order, and it does this in interaction with other institutions and ideologies; and there is no way that education could possibly extract itself, become autonomous, and then dictate the social order.

While these developments successfully exposed the failure of the liberal programme, they had two unfortunate consequences. First, the lack of autonomy of education from the class structure obviated any need to strengthen or recast worthwhile elements of the liberal tradition and, second, the collapse of the liberal agenda weakened opposition to the energetic imposition of market-based reforms.

Over the last decade sociologists of education have begun to recognise the importance of revitalising and radicalising the liberal agenda, while recognising its limitations. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985: 157), for instance, have argued that students need to be encouraged to explore the strengths and weaknesses of their various cultural experiences with a view to using this knowledge in the interest of 'self and social determination.' Similarly, Gutman (1987: 173) has noted that universities are well suited to the task of teaching their students how to think carefully and critically about political problems. From this point of view, a democratic education facilitates the 'conscious reproduction' of social relations by providing people with the means to develop a position on and engage in debate with competing conceptions of the 'good society.'

The most elaborate call for universities to strengthen their critical component, however, has come from Barnett. For Barnett (1990: 163) criticism is the essence of higher education. The most important aspect of a critical approach to knowledge is that it frees individuals from unquestioning faith in any view of the world. Barnett argues that critical reasoning cannot just be tacked on to existing courses of study, but must be pervasive enough so that the taken for granted assumptions of any given discipline can be illuminated and seen in a totally new light. Like Passmore, Barnett argues that a proper education should not be confined to questions of technique but should include a questioning of the wider social implications and values of the techniques. Barnett (1990:203) sums up his approach in terms of four interlocking strategies: critical perspectives, directed at the core of the student's curriculum; opening the curriculum to allow in elements of interdisciplinarity; particular attention being paid to the [critical] philosophical and sociological perspectives; and open learning, including self-directed learning and group work.

While a more thorough analysis of these strategies goes beyond the scope of this chapter a number of remarks are worth making. First, this model is underpinned by the assumption that the development and acquisition of knowledge is best achieved in the context of a relatively unconstrained 'conversation.' This being the case, Barnett argues that students need to be given more freedom to participate in the conversation in their own way. In particular, he argues that students should be given greater freedom to present to the members of one discipline, insights from other disciplines and that they should be given more scope to develop freedom and independence of thought, even if this means they make a greater number of mistakes.

More importantly, however, Barnett views critical thinking and theoretical pluralism as mutually supporting. For instance, by being exposed to a number of perspectives students are given the means to illuminate and critically assess the limitations of their favoured topic. Other writers have also recognised the connection between critical thinking and theoretical pluralism. For Siegel (1988:108) a pluralist approach to knowledge fosters critical thinking because it requires students to judge the relative merits of competing knowledge claims. Furthermore, Ashford (1983:20) has argued that dissent in universities cannot meaningfully occur if universities fail to maintain a diversity of knowledge.

In any case, theoretical pluralism can be justified on both practical and democratic grounds. From a practical point of view, theoretical pluralism is consistent with the view that scientific knowledge is fallible and subject to revision. Popper's reflections on scientific method are perhaps most apt in this context. Central to Popper's methodology is the idea that science is best conducted by producing 'bold conjectures' and subjecting them to critical assessment. For Popper 'every source, every suggestion is welcome; and every source, every suggestion is open to critical evaluation.' (1963: 27). In other words, new directions and discoveries in science are more likely if rival ideas are allowed to flourish and are subjected to critical evaluation - in this instance by the method of falsification.

Feyerabend (1979), however, pushes this idea further by arguing that both theories and methods should be allowed to proliferate. For Feyerabend (1979: 155) history has shown that important scientific achievements like the Copernican revolution could not have been achieved by adhering dogmatically to empirical evidence or even, in some cases, to rational argument. Had this been the case the 'new cosmology' would have been ruled out at its inception. Theoretical proliferation or 'epistemological anarchism', therefore, can be seen as an axial principle of scientific thought. Feyerabend (1978) is also at pains to point out this has important ramifications for democracy. If we accept a pluralistic approach to knowledge this will help to liberate non-Western cultures and other 'disqualified' (Foucault, 1980) forms of thought from the idea that all worthwhile knowledge must conform to one set of criteria. While this does not and should not render them immune from criticism (Chalmers, 1982: 166), it does prevent them from being summarily dismissed as 'unscientific.'

## The liberal and market universities re-evaluated

It is at this point that we return to evaluate the liberal and the market models of academic life. At the heart of the liberal tradition is the idea that the prime goal of the university is the dispassionate or impartial pursuit of truth. Knowledge, whether it be from the humanities or sciences, has great intrinsic value and should be pursued for its own sake. Within this tradition, furthermore, universities must operate with a significant degree of autonomy. If they are to discover and develop impartial, objective knowledge, their activities must be insulated from the corrupting influence of politics and from other powerful economic or religious groups. As far as graduates are concerned, the task of the liberal university was to produce persons of a 'cultivated' or well-rounded character. Such persons would be morally responsible, altruistic and capable of cultural and civic leadership. In short they would apply their knowledge to the welfare and cultural development of the nation. As Newman (1931:101) put it in his famous discourse on the idea of a university:

University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power and refining the intercourse of private life.

One of the more important and desirable features of this tradition was the idea that knowledge produced and disseminated by universities was socially beneficial. Academic knowledge in this view was not intended for individual economic gain or to serve sectional interests but was produced and transmitted for the cultural benefit of graduates and the community at large. Knowledge, in other words was seen as a social good. Nevertheless, as Barnett (1990: 108) notes, the liberal university carried out the function of cultural reproduction in a rather passive and conservative manner. For instance, the cultural tradition it maintained is deeply sexist, eurocentric and has generally benefited a minority of the population (Shuker, 1987).

Another potentially positive feature of the liberal university was its emphasis on reflective thought. Newman and other liberal thinkers often stressed the importance of situating various modes of inquiry within the context of a whole system of thought. Science or vocational knowledge, for example, should not be learned in isolation from art and morality. In fact a liberal education, which encouraged a breadth of mind and philosophic outlook, was seen as an essential adjunct to the narrow instrumental thought characteristic of modern society (Leavis, 1943). Certainly, if graduates are to be capable of critically appraising the basic presuppositions of their chosen field, the breadth of mind described by liberal thinkers is an important prerequisite.

In practice, however, the liberal tradition tended to suppress this because of the sharp distinction its adherents drew between facts and values. An example of such a view is to be found in Max Weber's (Gerth & Mills, 1978) well-known essay on 'Science as a Vocation'. According to Weber, intellectual integrity demands that academics limit themselves to stating the facts about their subject matter. Adopting a negative or positive evaluation of the subject matter is a political rather than a scientific issue and should be dealt with outside the lecture hall. This approach has led to a number of problems, however. It has allowed scientists to ignore the social implications of their research (Rose & Rose, 1971). But, just as importantly it has created difficulties for those modes of critical inquiry, like Marxism or feminism, which are connected with overt political agendas. Arguably, modes of inquiry like this reveal and make problematic deeply ingrained assumptions we hold about ourselves and society. Therefore, if the university is to retain and enhance its critical capabilities, fields like this will need to be protected and expanded.

Does market liberalism fair any better? The 'market university,' to use an ideal type, is primarily engaged in a search for efficiency, product innovation and the conquest of new markets. Knowledge, in other words, is pursued for economic ends. University education, in this context, becomes tantamount to supplying the economy with highly skilled labour. Research is conducted in order to 'add value' to the commodities we sell overseas. From this point of view, the university

student is a rationally self-seeking individual who purchases education for the purposes of a financial return in the labour market. This departure from the liberal tradition clearly has implications for the relationship between the university and society. Since the task of the university is to serve the economy, its activities should be dictated by the economy and by the state because of its 'investment' in tertiary education. The general orientation and justification of a market-based education is summed by the Minister of Education:

We live in a global community and a global market place. If we seek to improve our economic standing relative to that of our competitors, our commitment to education and training must be greater than that of other countries. We must adapt more quickly to change than our competitors, and the skills of our workforce must improve faster than the skills of other workforces. We must invest in people, our greatest economic resource (Smith, 1993:7).

Is such a perspective conducive to critical thinking? According to one strand of thought it is. In this view, critical thinking in education is likely to be encouraged by corporate recruiters who require increasing numbers of creative and innovative employees. From this point of view, the gap or contradiction between higher education (as we have defined it) and the requirements of labour market appears to diminish. According to McMurtry (1991: 215), however, there are two reasons for doubting this argument. First, the selection of those for their quality of critical and autonomous thinking is likely to be limited to upper management only; the majority of occupations do not require these attributes. Second, critical thinking will in any case only be tolerated to the extent that it conforms to financial objectives. As McMurtry (*ibid*) notes:

[employees] ... are not permitted to be autonomous, critic a] and dialogical in any way that might challenge the firm's right to maximise its profits, that might expose its practices of unfairness or pollution, that might question the social need for its products, that might recognise others' goods as better value, that might criticise the firm's or firm superior's policies ....

Critical thinking, it seems, may be largely limited to issues of technique. Nevertheless, freemarket supporters also believe that their reforms will bring about a more diverse range of educational options. Give the power to allocate resources to consumers and the providers will automatically supply what consumers require. In a 'pluralistic society' where the needs of individuals or groups are diverse, this will automatically give rise to a diverse range of courses in higher education (Blandy, 1988: 19). This, however, is an illusion. In a society where extremes of wealth and poverty are becoming greater and where students are compelled to pay increasing sums of money for their education, it would be surprising if they made educational choices in anything other than instrumental terms. Educational choices, in other words, will increasingly be motivated by extrinsic economic factors. In any case, it seems clear that the whole thrust of market-based reforms is to turn universities into the servants of industry. This can only be interpreted as a step towards a 'one dimensional' society where issues of truth, justice and art become subordinated to efficiency and technical control (Marcuse, 1964; Lyotard, 1979).

Still, the market university can be justified on grounds that New Zealand needs a greater number of highly skilled personnel to maintain economic growth. From this point of view universities must cater for the needs of a new post-industrial economy where information is the key factor in the global struggle for competitive advantage. Such a view, however, is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the need for a massive increase in highly skilled workers in New Zealand is completely unsubstantiated (Gordon & Snook, 1992). In fact, evidence from America shows that most jobs created by high-tech industries are in the low skilled, low paid areas of assembly line and office work (Apple, 1987). With user-friendly software and increasing automation some skill requirements may decline or disappear altogether. Second, the drive for constant economic growth, which underpins the reforms and the capitalist economy, is environmentally unsustainable. This points to the need to redistribute rather than create more wealth. Finally, automation and the proliferation of labour-saving devices should result in more leisure time. This being the case, it would make more sense to transfer resources away from the applied disciplines into the arts, curiosity driven research and critical social sciences.



## Conclusion

In the first chapter we attempted to show that many of the strategies used to commercialise or corporatize the state sector in New Zealand were also deployed in the restructuring of higher education. In each of the following chapters, we examined these strategies in turn and attempted to show why each could fail to fulfil the objectives for which they were designed. In this chapter we have outlined two attributes which we believe are fundamental to the existence and vitality of higher education and essential for a democratic society. These attributes - critical thinking and theoretical pluralism - were used to evaluate the liberal and market models of higher education. Although the seeds of critical thinking and theoretical pluralism were present within the liberal tradition both models fell short of these ideals.

While it is not the purpose of this chapter to set out in detail an alternative agenda for higher education, some brief remarks can be made about the implications of these ideals for higher education policy: First, academic freedom is essential for the success of this programme. As Passmore (1967:198) notes '... being critical can be taught only by men [sic] who can themselves freely partake in critical thinking.' Second, if the goal of critical thinking is to be taken seriously, then so must the academic freedom or *lemlfreiheit* of students. Students, in principle as well as practice, must be included as part of the academic community (Barnett, 1990: 138-142). Third, the academic community must be more open to alternative cultures and ways of thinking than has hitherto been the case.

Without doubt much more could be said about these issues; indeed, every one of them is contentious. One thing should be clear, however. Debates about the role, nature and prospects of higher education should not lose sight of the context within which higher education exists. This has important implications for the success or failure of programmes such as we have suggested. For instance, in a society characterised by growing disparities in wealth, where people are encouraged to see themselves as consumers rather than citizens with democratic rights, it is unlikely that higher education will be seen by students and the community as anything other than a means to an economic end. In other words, without corresponding changes in wider society, universities will find it that much harder to convince their 'clientele' that higher education is anything more than a provider of meal tickets.

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