

What is the New University?

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The heart of the student movement today beats in Amsterdam. The occupation of the Senate House by staff and students at the University of Amsterdam has rekindled the flame for a free and democratic university. The ensuing fire has spread fast and wide throughout the Netherlands, which now counts at least five geographically distinct campaigns under the banner of the so-called 'New University' (apart from Amsterdam: Groningen, Leiden, Maastricht, Nijmegen and Utrecht). The movement has also garnered support from the FNV, the largest Dutch trade union and numerous statements of solidarity from the rest of the world.

Perhaps the best way to understand this movement is as a challenge to rethink the very idea of the university. What follows is one attempt to meet this challenge in light of the movement's own self-conceptions.

The University as it should be

One might think of the ideal faculty as a well-ordered jazz conservatory. Each of its jazz orchestras is initially led by a conductor. But once it picks up on a particular score, the orchestra develops its individuality through studied confidence and improvisation. It thus takes over from the conductor, who is now both leading it and simultaneously being led by it. All the while everyone pursues the music as an end in itself. The obvious upshot is a fuller musical self-development for all.

The educational basis for this 'concert of mutually supporting self-fulfillments', as G. A. Cohen put it, is the class. The teacher introduces a set of ideas, which students pick up through studied confidence and improvisation. This

increases their self-assurance and grasp over the idea, to the point that they take over the process from the teacher. Classes aim at the self-affirming abolition of the student/teacher distinction. Good classes achieve that aim. The upshot is that all parties to the process develop their knowledge and talents as ends in themselves.

The University as it is

One problem with this ideal structure is its fragility: there are numerous ways it can be undermined by external interference. Suppose, for example, that material support to the universities were to be made dependent on the number of students obtaining degrees. This would immediately transform its structure. For its aim now becomes the award of certificates, not the free pursuit of knowledge. At the same time, a perverse hierarchy is insinuated into the staff/student relationship: the former are treated as the de facto gatekeepers of degrees, as opposed to equal participants in the creative process. This is to turn universities into certification agencies.

Or consider another possibility: deciding the number of students independently of the number of teachers or the nature of the subject. The upshot is that both teacher and student lose any measure of control over the pursuit of their institutional purpose, namely the free pursuit of knowledge. One might as well decide the number of orchestra musicians independently of the exigencies of the score.

Imagine, finally, that university students are to be treated as consumers of 'education services'. This spells the death of the free pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. For the university's institutional aim is now completely inverted: the maximand becomes the number of potential customers, subject to wage and administrative costs. The orchestra no longer optimizes in order to play; rather it

plays in order to optimize.

The situation in the Netherlands

Most Dutch universities have suffered variants of these kinds of encroachment upon the free pursuit of knowledge in recent years. The origin of the encroachment is a government-sanctioned bureaucratic commercialization of university life. The Netherlands is, in this respect, a mere ten years behind the UK. The New University aims to reverse this tendency. How does it propose to do that? The answer has two parts: instead of commercialization, academic freedom. Instead of bureaucratization, democracy. Before I say something about each of these two parts, some points of clarification.

Dutch universities are not private. They do not, therefore, operate on the basis of maximization of shareholder value, or maximization of suck-up to benefactors. Dutch universities are public. They are therefore funded through general taxation and operate for the public interest. This is the way universities should be operated and funded, in my view. This is so for three reasons.

First, education is what philosophers sometimes call an 'all-purpose means'. That is, whatever your plan of life, an education increases your prospects of fulfilling it. It follows that the more unequal the distribution of education, the more unequal the social prospects of leading a good life. For this reason, education should be publicly provided to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity of leading a good life.

Second, education has externalities. That is, the benefits accruing to any private individual providing the good in question tend to be lower than the total benefits to society. Anything short of public provision is therefore likely to lead to suboptimal levels of provision.

Third, the private provision of education tends to lead to the kind of instrumentalizing inversion I described above: barring sufficient suck-up to private donors, the institution's only means of survival becomes the watering-down of its constitutive purpose: the free pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself.

A common objection against the view defended here asks: 'should the university give nothing back?'. This is a variant of the old conservative question: 'why should I pay for your education if I don't benefit from it?'. The preceding paragraphs sketched answers to this question. Note, however, that those who defend university reform on grounds of social contribution alone, assume that the university can be made to contribute more to society. The assumption is by no means obvious: why assume that the Dave Brubeck Quartet would have given anything back if it had been compelled to do so?

– Education Secretary: 'Dear Mr Brubeck, your piece Take Five was not bad, but we need projects with more impact. Perhaps replace the piano with a harpsichord?'

– Dave Brubeck: 'Dear Mr Secretary, thanks for the suggestion. I shall look into a harpsichord-based collaboration with Justin Bieber'.

How to succeed and how to fail

So what's wrong with the Dutch situation? The answer has to do with the policy mix pursued by successive Dutch governments, which contrives to simulate a market mechanism throughout the public sector. Universities are thus encouraged to compete against one another for students and grants on the basis of dubious benchmarks and targets. At the same time funding and research opportunities come to depend on measurable 'output', citation indices and success at obtaining extra-university funding.

The New University would do away with market simulation by returning academic freedom to its rightful place. Any benchmarking, targets and citation indices that impinge on academic development, tenure decisions, student admission, or inter-university relations violate the imperative of free and independent inquiry. They introduce a wedge between the orchestra and its music-playing. This does not mean that teaching and research should not be evaluated. All it means is that, if teaching and research are to be evaluated, then evaluation must be based on their content alone. This is what the institution of peer review is for. Academic freedom acts as a bulwark against commercialization.

Now, the restoration of academic freedom is necessary to reverse the drive towards bureaucratic commercialization. It is not, however, sufficient. For this drive draws its momentum from the top-down realignment of university structures: top level bureaucrats are turned into managers, who then assume the role of CEOs in a newly-founded 'University Ltd.'. It follows that the commercialization of universities can only be decisively blocked by flattening the mooted hierarchies.

The band should be run by those who produce the music, not by some dissonant external body. More concretely: say the governing bodies of the University, of the Faculties, Departments and Institutes were elected by all concerned staff and students. Then the looming prospect of turning universities into supermarkets would subside. Democracy acts as a bulwark against bureaucratization.

The irresistible conclusion is that the distinct demands for academic freedom and democratization go hand in hand. Indeed, they are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for blocking the advent of privatization. Clearer perception of this simple fact makes for clearer perception of the goals of the movement for a New University. It is

against this twin criterion of academic freedom and internal democracy that its successes and failures will be judged.