Putting theory to work – a.k.a 'if you don't like academia, why don't you leave?'

Paul Taylor

Introduction - Humboldt's rift

> The University of Culture, instituted by Humboldt, draws its legitimacy from culture, which names the synthesis of teaching and research, process and product, history and reason, philology and criticism, historical scholarship and aesthetic experience, the institution and the individual. (Readings, 1996: 65)

> "I don't mind there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them" [Charles Clarke, the education secretary]... A spokesman for the Department for Education and Skills said: "The secretary of state was basically getting at the fact that universities exist to enable the British economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of global change". (Woodward and Smithers, 2003)

The rift that now exists between Humboldt's university of culture and contemporary notions of the university's role in creating employable citizens was epitomized when, in addition to his above endorsement of ornamental historians, the Secretary of State for Education in the UK, Charles Clarke said education for its own sake was 'a bit dodgy' and that students 'need a relationship with the workplace' (BBC News, 2003). Since then the employability agenda has become institutionally enshrined by the moving of universities from the Department of Education, first to a newly named Department for Education and Skills, and then to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS – sometimes irony is helpless before the acronymic voice). Employability in this sense has become the standard mode of discourse - not only for the media and government ministers, but also academics marketing their institution on parent-centred University Open Days (by such practices is soil heaped upon the increasingly buried notion of students as independent young scholars).

There may well be various academic situations in which the highest ideals of the Ivory Tower cannot be realistically upheld in the given circumstances, but increasingly, academics are accommodating their actions and values to higher education's new *realpolitik* so closely that there is no longer any critical distance left from which the best aspects of the Ivory Tower can be recognized, never mind defended. To illustrate the point I include in what follows some personal experiences and resonant examples from the quite possibly dodgy and elitist fields of literature and history, but I invite readers to judge for themselves whether the employment of such examples succeeds in illuminating significant wider trends.

Dispiriting as the practical employment-orientated realities of university life now are, this article suggests there are two insidiously dangerous and under-acknowledged consequences of the employability mentality – managerialism and academic self-hatred. External threats are no less important for being expected, but less expected and much more disappointing is the pervasion of these pernicious attitudes *within* universities. Their rise corresponds with a decline in the employability of another form of language – critically reflexive discourse that academics frequently research and teach with pride, but signally fail to apply to their own disturbingly conformist situation.

Cathedrals of the mind(less)

> We flatter ourselves that we are civilized yet we habitually place conformity before reason... How... can we stop ourselves being so bloody stupid? (Loughlin and Seedhouse, 2002a: v)

> I adore certain symbols no less than you do. But it would be absurd to sacrifice to the symbol the reality that it symbolises. Cathedrals are to be adored until the day when, to preserve them, it would be necessary to deny the truths which they teach. (Marcel Proust -Time Regained)

Proust's lament for the lost power of cathedrals holds more than a passing resemblance to a situation in which academics increasingly place bloody stupid conformity before the reason they are supposed to adore and the truths they should be teaching. *Putting theory to work*, the employability-friendly title of this piece, comes from the website slogan of a university social research centre where I gave a talk a few years ago. Well-versed in the complex theories of figures like Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, some of the centre's academics nevertheless took exception to my argument that 'putting theory to work' represents a profound oxymoron. I suggested that constantly seeking new employment opportunities for theory in a series of essentially empiricist research projects represents a fundamental misunderstanding and ultimate bastardization of what

makes theory in particular, but university life more generally, innately valuable – its independence from any necessity for utility in an age otherwise given over completely to pragmatic values.

A new generation of commercially pre-conditioned, knowledge transfer-focused academics is a depressing enough phenomenon, but for theorists to simultaneously read highly radical works *and* find ever more (un)imaginative ways to maximize the practical relevance of those works to the latest university corporate mission statement plumbs new depths of Pyrrhic defeat. The rhetorical question that provides this paper's sub-title comes from the question and answer session of my talk when, somewhat akin to a *Daily Mail* reader's response to a criticism of UK society by a member of an ethnic minority, it was suggested to me that if I was so unhappy about the state of universities I could always leave. What struck me most about this exchange was not simply its reflection of the fact that some of the audience disagreed with my 'old-fashioned' position but that their disagreement centred upon an almost blasé rejection of notions that I had hitherto always thought of as a *sine qua non* of academic life in the humanities – for example, a shared sense that, at least as an ideal, theory is valuable for its own sake (whilst fully acknowledging that the exigencies of survival, the need to obtain funding etc., might require various compromises of that ideal).

Further evidence of how low the intellectual ethos has sunk appeared in the post-talk pub discussion. In response to the concern I voiced about my own university's threat to close its Classics department, I received the disdainful pseudo-Clarkean response that Classics are 'the boss's knowledge'. In another after-work pub situation, chatting about a new 'module' (even with such basic terms we are co-opted into the anomic realm of employability) I was developing, I was sincerely asked by my colleague 'what are your learning outcomes?'. With respect to the rejector of classical knowledge, such terminology really is 'boss's knowledge' and all the more worrying for its presence in an informal conversation. If Latin was not proscribed in this Brave New managerial World, I would venture the observation that, on both occasions, *in vino veritas*....

My final personally-experienced example of this increasingly common phenomenon of academic self-hatred comes from a guest editor's feedback on a journal article that had been accepted for publication but which I was told had significant problems relating to its expression. Expecting a large number of revisions to correct my clumsy English, I was surprised to find that the problem stemmed from my choice of seven words scattered through the piece. These included 'temerity', 'proclivity', and 'aperçu' – the latter word I assumed had been incorporated into general English usage but is perhaps now verboten as a result of UKIP's growing political influence. It appears that, even in the

university sector, any language that aspires beyond the proudly Gradgrindian fails to meet the employability requirements of a new breed of vocabulary wardens.

In response to the anti-intellectual, employability-friendly, attitudes described above, I now have the temerity to indulge my proclivity for aperçus garnered from the distinctly non-employability-orientated fields of literature and history. To the extent to which these excerpts can be deemed 'useful', that usefulness is limited to what Adorno, *pace* Kant, described as 'purposiveness without purpose', a quality that is rapidly losing its place in new educational empires of the senseless.

Empires of the senseless

> Lo thy dread empire, Chaos, is restor'd;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word.
>
> (Alexander Pope - *The Dunciad,* cited in Maskell and Robinson, 2001: 63)

> ... In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.
>
> Suárez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658
> (Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science')

The first of the above two literary quotations is employed to convey the means by which the educational light of higher learning is snuffed out by the Trojan mouse of managerialism. In the second, Borges's disused map also acts as a resonant metaphor for the ultimate consequences: a loss of fondness by new generations; the pitiless rejection of uselessness; the bestial and beggar like existence to which its inhabitants have been reduced. Pope's uncreating words appear in higher education today as a form of linguistic slippage in which a spate of employment orientated euphemisms are difficult to disagree with but equally difficult to pin down exactly what they mean. Phrases like *lifelong learning* and *key skills* appear to evoke a generally life-enriching process against which it appears curmudgeonly to object that, with present trends, lifelong learning risks referring to the fact that

it now takes a life-time to learn what the average student used to know by the age of eighteen, whilst *key skills* reduce the hard-earned and well-integrated qualities of a student carefully attuned to critical thinking and intellectual thoroughness to a prospective employee for Chubb Locks Ltd.

Employability discourse is disseminated through the promiscuous use of euphemisms, neologisms, and the skilful slipping into arguments of questionable, yet generally unquestioned, equivalences. Ultimately unjustifiable and illogical parallels between dissimilar concepts and values are sustained by mere repetition: '... it is a perfectly routine and rather frequent equivalence that implicitly carries... a message' (Fairclough, 2000: 27). This pandemic of uncreating words would still be unfortunate, but eminently more understandable, if academics lacked the intellectual skills and knowledge necessary to identify the infection and provide adequate prophylaxis. The essence of the problem, however, has long been known as indicated by Marcuse's observation from the 1960s:

> Total commercialization joins formerly antagonistic spheres of life, and this union expresses itself in the smooth linguistic conjunction of conflicting parts of speech. To a mind not sufficiently conditioned, much of the public speaking and printing appears utterly surrealistic. (Marcuse 1968: 89)

Dispiritingly, academic minds increasingly do now appear to be sufficiently conditioned. Even more dispiriting and ironic is that despite the purported importance of transferable skills, there is little evidence that departments otherwise rich in expertise relating to the detection and deconstruction of linguistic and ideological manipulations are proficient in employing that expertise for their own critical needs – a form of employability that would at least stay true to the Humboldtian ideal of a university worthy of the name.

The decline and fall of the educational empire

> On the night of August 10th, 410, when King Alariac's 100,000 Visigoths drove their bonze-headed battering rams through the walls of Rome, the emperor Honorious was in his palace on the Adriatic coast, arranging and re-arranging his collection of prize poultry. Later the next day, while the Goths were busy looting the imperial city and murdering its inhabitants, a court chamberlain in Ravenna informed the emperor that Rome had perished. Honorious received the news with shock and disbelief. "Rome perished?" he said. "It is not an hour since she was feeding out of my hand". The chamberlain explained that that he referred to the city of Rome, not to the emperor's chicken of the same name. The clarification relieved the emperor of his anxiety. "But I thought my friend... that you meant that I had lost my bird Rome". (Lapham, 1997: 218)

The chamberlain is unable to convey a sense of the tragedy that has befallen the city of Rome because Honorious remains oblivious to any notion of shared concern for the fate of an institution that lies beyond his self-indulgently narrow concerns. Similarly, *managerialism* is distinguishable from *management* by its self-regarding fixations. Whereas, ideally at least, management involves the implementation of a series of acts and processes to achieve a desirable end more efficiently, managerialism provides its own self-referential and ultimately unverifiable justifications for frequently inefficient and undesirable ends while Rome burns. An obvious example of managerialism in (in)action would be the tsunami of university documentation that employ phrases like 'quality', 'excellence', and 'best practice', but as part of centrally-controlled processes and audits that are innately divorced from any research-informed, chalk-face-based conceptions of quality and excellence. Managerialist processes (like empirical research methods) can only measure what they are designed to measure – that which is already compliant with the values built into the measuring process. Somehow, despite the general growth of employability-fixated utilitarianism in higher education, the particular usefulness of managerialist concepts outside their own self-referential frame of reference escapes serious questioning.

There are professional university bureaucrats and managers who very effectively enable universities to deliver their 'core business' – teaching and research. There are other much less effective (but no less successful) managers who routinely employ managerialism's inertial strength against academics directly engaged in teaching and research. Professional university bureaucrats cannot be accused of betraying an academic profession to which they either never belonged in the first place, or which, if they did once belong, they have since made a conscious decision to leave behind in order to seek greasier climes/climbs. Much more curious is the manner in which academics have allowed themselves to become self-interpellated by the employability agenda. The term academic self-hatred describes this self-interpellation and can be defined as the state of mind in which the sufferer is embarrassed or ashamed of the values embodied in Humboldt's concept of The University of Culture.

Self-hating academics tend to belong to one of two groups:

1. those unable or unwilling to distinguish between Humboldt's aspirational model of a university culture available to all those who can benefit from it and the on-going transformation of that aspiration into The Culture-free University of Employability available to all those who can pay for it.

2. those who nominally recognize the distinction, but who still, through their day-to-day actions (if not words), help to increase the pace at which we are moving from the former model to the latter.

Higher education's role as a real world entity, but one informed by, and constantly aspiring to, ideal values, has been sacrificed to the obsessive auditing as to whether chickens have come home, not so much to roost as, more accurately, to sit in cramped cages so that:

> ... current higher education culture, the purpose of which... is to make 'balance-sheets sound like Homer and Homer sound like balance-sheets' ... now turns solely on the enforced internalisation of managerial control mechanisms. Their intention is to displace universalising intellectual comportment by task-orientated technocratic procedures through behavioural conditioning; to make the experience of thinking and learning the sterilized aggregate of specified technical norms. (Davies, 1996: 23)

The reduction of learning to sterilized aggregates can perhaps best be illustrated by the distinction between the concepts of education and training that is now honoured more in the breach than the observance. That the two are profoundly distinct entities can be gauged from the different parental responses that would accompany a child's announcement upon returning home from school that they had received either sex education or sex training. Training is undoubtedly an important part of any advanced economy, but academics shoot themselves in the foot when they allow themselves to be dominated by its terminology.

The academic personality

> ... the curious passion for the mannerism of the non-committed. (Mills, 2000: 79)

The community values of a group such as academics are undermined when they internalize the functionality of means as an end in itself based upon 'the *meticulous functional division of labour*'... 'the *substitution of technical for a moral responsibility*'. (Bauman, 1989: 98; italics in original) The removal of academics' spontaneity/discretion and moral responsibility combined with functional specialization means that 'communal mechanisms of social regulation have all but disappeared and local communities ceased to be self-sufficient and self-reliant... the void tends to be filled by new... supra-communal forces' (*ibid.*: 112). It is these supra-communal forces that now dominate today's academic discourse – the new speech rules of Learning and Teaching (learning paradoxically preceding teaching) and the transferable skills of the employability agenda.

The development of alternative sources of morality is further pre-empted by additional modes of reification:

1. The 'schismogenetic chains' described by Gregory Bateson (1973: 41-42) - authority breeds submission in an exponentially expanding, self-referential cycle.

2. 'Carefully circumscribed parochiality' (Bauman, 1989: 211) - in the context of academia, the disciplinary-facilitated perversion of narrow intellectual focus and the widespread instrumentalization of research.

3. The elimination of teleological categories - 'the relegation of values to the realm of subjectivity' (Bauman, 1989: 10). Traditional academic values look increasingly anachronistic and off the pace compared with the vacuous vibrancy of managerial discourse.

The combined effect of this imbrication of systemic processes, and the cultural norms so produced, creates what *Bauman pace Milgram* terms an 'agentic state' - effectively, the rise of heteronomous rather than autonomous thought. In such a state, the usual notion of responsibility becomes 'free-floating': to the extent that '*the organization as a whole is an instrument to obliterate responsibility*' (*ibid.*: 163; italics in original).

For Arendt (1994), the total nature of totalitarianism is not about domination *per se* but making people superfluous, it is not about the indoctrination of opinions but the preventing their formation ahead of time. Likewise, new academics are not so much browbeaten over time, as their autonomy is pre-emptively lost. Paraphrasing Adorno, they belong to the bureaucracy even before they join it. Common-sense and truth are then free to be supplanted by super-sense where 'nothing matters but consistency' (Arendt, 1994: 458) and the pseudo-reality thus created begins to offer its own bureaucratically textured compensation to the extent that: 'totalitarian regimes hold the power to demonstrate the relativity of success and failure, and to show how a loss in substance can become a gain in organization' and then factuality itself becomes dependent upon the totalitarian world that created the initial fiction... (*ibid.*: 385). Hence, in terms of externally situated labyrinthine auditing regimes, universities make sustained attempts to meet the requirements of the defining terms of the model irrespective of their significance for the reality of life on the chalk-face. In this climate, the distinction between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and fact dissolves into bland statements of corporate purpose in ever more glossy university brochures.

It is an open question as to whether academics today, in their heart of hearts, still realize that the choice between the employability agenda or the death of universities actually means the death of universities through the employability agenda. The sole cause for optimism resides in what Arendt viewed as the unique power of narratives to release new meanings. Hopefully, academics in future can reacquaint themselves with that power and become more critically sensitive to the defining abilities of fictional representations - whether they be literary or bureaucratic.

Conclusion

> ... night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
> And some who have just returned from the border say
> there are no barbarians any longer.
> And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of solution.
> (C. P. Cavafy, Waiting for the Barbarians, 1898)

C.P. Cavafy eloquently expresses the current situation in higher education. The poem describes the citizens of Rome dressing up in their finery to receive the barbarians they have been told are arriving that day. The concluding lines quoted above provide an ironic commentary on the disorientation felt by the Romans upon the eventual non-appearance of the barbarians and the subsequent realization that the loss of their alien values creates a profound, hitherto unforeseen problem. The Romans have an identity crisis since there is no one against whom they can oppose their civilized values, and even worse, there is the further implication that without noticing, they have become barbarians themselves. The most cursory observation of preparations for either an external research or teaching audit demonstrates the continued resonance of the poem. Like Cavafy's barbarians, no one is quite sure in what form these 'initiatives' will appear, if at all, yet this does not stop academics preparing for its visitors with a statistical finery that becomes increasingly pervasive whether the visitors ever come or not.

In a review of ex-President Clinton's memoirs it was suggested that he 'bequeathed to his party not a clear call to high goals but an omnidirectional proneness to pusillanimity and collapse' (Wills, cited in Graetz and Shapiro, 2005: 264). If academics are to find direction, they need to realize that in terms of the ideals expressed in this article, '[t]he unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization' (Marcuse, 1968: 4). However, it is a mistake to look for the strength of those forces in vandalizing hordes outside the gates of the Ivory Tower. Well within the walls, today's Visigoths are the

employability-fixated 'customers' waving their £9,000 cheques, apparatchiks eager to 'facilitate' satisfactory 'learning outcomes', and academics too pusillanimous to insist upon the distinction between the reality of education and the managerialist trappings of training. Perhaps Cavafy is right and there are no barbarians any longer, or perhaps even more disturbingly, we are all highly employable barbarians now....

references

Arendt, H. (1994 [1951]) *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York: Harvest Books.

Bateson, G. (1973) *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Frogmore: Paladin.

Bauman, Z. (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

BBC News (2003) 'Clarke criticised over classics', 31 January. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2712833.stm]

Davies, M. L. (1996) 'University culture or intellectual culture?' in B. Brecher, O. Fleischmann and J. Halliday (eds.) *The university in a liberal state*. Aldershot: Avebury.

Fairclough, N. (2000) *New Labour, new language?*. London: Routledge.

Graetz, M. and I. Shapiro (2005) *Death by a thousand cuts: The fight over taxing uninherited wealth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lapham, L. (1997) *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Verso.

Loughlin, M. and D. Seedhouse (2002) Ethics, management and mythology: Rational decision making for health service professionals. Abingdon: Radcliffe Medical Press.

Marcuse, H. (1968) *One-dimensional man*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Maskell, D. and I. Robinson (2001) *The new idea of a university*. London: Haven Books.

Mills, C. W. (2000 [1959]) *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Proust, M. (1996) *Time regained*. London: Vintage.

Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. London: Harvard University Press.

Woodword, W. and R. Smithers (2003) 'Clarke dismisses medieval historians', *The Guardian*, 9 May. [http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/may/09/highereducation.politics]

the author

Paul Taylor is senior lecturer in Communications Theory at the University of Leeds. He is the author/co-author of several books relating to critical theory including 'Critical theories of mass media: Then and now' (Palgrave, 2005), 'Žižek and the media' (Polity, 2010), and the forthcoming 'Heidegger and the media' (Polity, 2014). He is the General Editor of the International Journal for Žižek Studies.
E-mail: P.A.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk