

# A PLACE TO THINK?: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE AGE OF THE 'KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY'

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## EVERYONE NEEDS A PLACE TO THINK

Susan Sontag does it in Times square, Ian McEwan does it in the Chilterns. Naomi Klein does it on horseback. Archimedes did it in the bath and a lot of people I know say they do it on the loo. Everyone needs a place to think, but none of the ads in the launch campaign for BBC4 with this strapline featured anyone doing it in Academia. All the people chosen were public intellectuals, they were well known writers, artists, musicians, or cultural commentators but none of them were academics as such. Unsurprisingly they were also extremely photogenic. And sharply dressed. In the era of what Regis Debray has called the Mediocracy, the dishevelled egghead look (aka John Bayley or Sir Patrick Moore) is most definitely out. Now that iconography has replaced ideology in the public authorisation of ideas you have, it seems, to be a fully fledged knowledge power dresser to stand a chance of getting your arguments across to a public wider than your immediate intellectual peers. This shift towards the impression management of knowledge and its implication for sustaining some kind of critical intellectual practice inside and outside the university is one of the themes I want to address.<sup>1</sup>

1. This is a shortened version of a much longer study of changing modes of intellectual production and their relation to popular cultures of knowledge. A version of the present paper was given at the Festschrift for Mike Rustin at the University of East London. I am also very grateful to Ien Ang, George Morgan and other staff at the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney for an opportunity to give a version of this text at a public lecture and for the contributions of the discussants, Michael Singh and Bronwyn Davies. None of the above should be held responsible for the views expressed here.

There is another more material aspect to this. One of the commonest refrains amongst academics is that we can never get any 'work' done when we go into work. In other words we are so busy and stressed out by our ever increasing teaching and admin loads that we literally have no time or place to think - let alone to do anything approximating sustained research. That is saved up for 'the sabbatical'. The sabbatical has become the holy grail of Academic Life - the promised land where all the ideas that have laid dormant will come to fruition, all the scattered fragments of writing will be brought together into a coherent whole, and we will return to the academic treadmill refreshed and with a renewed sense of intellectual purpose.

The reality is somewhat different. The original meaning of the sabbatical, from the Hebrew *Sabat* entailed the principle that one year in seven the field lies fallow, so that it may be more productive on the eighth. And indeed the notion of a latency period in the gestation of ideas is one that is strongly endorsed by research into the nature of creativity. However, the groves of Academe have long ago been cut down to make way for the multi-site campus. These days sabbaticals are definitely not about lying fallow; they are part of

the 'publish or perish' ethos which has come to dominate so much of our intellectual life. So we have a university research culture held together by the desire to get the hell out of the university into some kind of privatised sanctuary where there is, at last, time and space to think. Yet once people get there they often promptly collapse into lethargy or ill health, bodies and minds so addicted to the routine stress of academic life that they simply cannot cope with its sudden absence.

Of course there are always individuals who successfully buck these trends. We all know colleagues who are productive in ways that go far beyond what could ever be measured by the audit culture and the British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), whose research interests combine breadth and depth in a way that both contributes to disciplinary innovation and opens up conversations between disciplines and who combine the avocations of the public intellectual and private scholar. But the question is why are they so few and far between and getting scarcer by the year? What is it about the way our universities are currently organised that militates against sustaining a culture of intellectual innovation?

As soon as we ask a question like that, one of the traps we can fall into is thinking that at some point, once upon a time, things were a lot different and better. Someone is sure to start talking about the great lost idea of the university as a community of scholars. Take for example the recent furore in the UK over the Education Secretary's attack on some of our Ivory Tower dwellers for failing, as he saw it, to help our economy and society deal with the negative effects of globalisation. In the comments page of the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* there was not a Vice Chancellor who did not protest and declare allegiance to the idea of the university as a privileged site for the unfettered pursuit of knowledge and truth. Those same VCs who have been the most enthusiastic in ensuring that every aspect of university life conforms to corporate norms of management accountability, who are the keenest promoters of business links and the commercial applications of research, are the very ones who with shining eyes conjure up images of the mediaeval cloisters where scholars pursue their studies uncontaminated by the ways of the world.

The mediaeval historians whom Charles Clarke seems to think should be retired early or retained merely as an ornament to the new edifices of knowledge transfer, will tell you that European universities in the middle ages were very far from being ivory towers; they were disputatious, often violent places, centres of intrigue enmeshed with the workings of both church and court, where academic backstabbing might involve physical injury as well as intellectual insult, and heretical ideas might be punished by banishment, or torture at the hands of the Inquisition, while student riots and street brawls frequently ended in death. Nevertheless I don't think we should see the invoking of a romanticised ideal of the university as community of scholars as pure hype. The fact is that so called blue sky thinking is precisely what the knowledge managerialists who have taken up

residence in the boardrooms of global capitalism want most of all. And this is not exactly new.

My best friend at Cambridge in the 1960s got a First in Classics and a special prize for his translation of Euripides' *Ion*, and then promptly went off to work for a leading advertising agency, where after sitting around lying fallow for about six months he leapt to sudden fame and fortune by coining the slogan 'For Mash eat Smash' for a new line in instant spuds. All of which goes to show that being a whizz at Greek verse at an ancient university will put you at the cutting edge of consumer culture in less time than it takes to boil a real potato. When the Bank of England, British Gas and HSBC send their top executives to learn the Whirling Dervish Dance so as to find inner peace and increase their business acumen, when the American Indian Medicine Wheel is used to take pension fund managers on an existential journey to discover their spiritual, emotional and creative selves, or Lao Tzu's *Art of War* serves as the basis for a best selling handbook on sales technique, then it is not surprising to find that the image of a community of scholars grubbing away in some obscure archive to make intellectual mountains out of textual molehills, should have a certain sentimental appeal for academics.

So, before we dismiss the idea of the university as having something to do with a community of scholarly practice as a cynical cover story, perhaps we should try to understand how this notion plays in the wider political context. Is it possible to see the university as the site of an old fashioned Marxist contradiction, between the (increasingly socialised) forces and (ever more individualised) relations of knowledge production? Can the 'crisis of the university' be traced to a growing tension between, on the one hand, the creation of a mass higher education system, charged with the training up of collective knowledge workers and on the other, the persistence of highly localised and hierarchical structures of academic self governance, competitive scholarship and symbolic narcissism, associated with the formation of an independent intelligentsia? Or are there important contradictions within this contradiction which cannot be dismissed as 'secondary' just because they do not fit into the Marxist schema? Not to mention a whole lot of other mediations going on?

#### THE GRAMMARS OF UN/KNOWING

One way of tracking the genealogy of intellectual work and its current crisis is to specify the shifting codes which connect particular ways of knowing objects to certain kinds of 'knowing subjects' within defined communities of practice. How the world is known through, for example, physics, biology or anthropology constructs iterative webs of story telling about procedures (alias methodologies) that intimately shape the identities of those who work within these frameworks. This process is not just bio- but ethno- and historically specific; in other words it bears not only on the trajectory of

individual lines of thought, but on particular cultures of enquiry, on the history of disciplines, and on knowledge's Other Scenes.

So for example we could begin by distinguishing the founding place of the scholar, ensconced in his or her study in terms of the pursuit of a hermeneutics of vocation as derived ultimately from the mediaeval scholastics. This is a research strategy governed by a quasi-spiritual quest for truths contained within a corpus of texts. The practice of reading here becomes a special form of apprenticeship to inherited wisdoms. The drive is not to produce new ideas, but to interrogate old ones, to bring them alive and reinterpret them in the light of contemporary circumstance. Historically we have the model of the Talmudic or Koranic scholar. More recently we have seen the emergence of a secular equivalent: the poststructuralist who pores over once sacred texts in order to 'deconstruct' their mysteries, either by reading between the lines or by challenging their canonical status. Yet despite the fact that the power of divination has been decisively transferred from text to reader, and thence from the process of authorship to the context of reception, the focus of innovation is still on interpretative strategy as such. From this vantage point nothing new ever happens outside the text and its representation.

In contrast, the romantic movement and its successor *avant gardes* privilege the vocation of the writer or intellectual as the site of a direct, textually unmediated, encounter between creative individual and phenomenal world. The existential quest for truth may be turned inwards to a transcendental self invented as a medium of genial inspiration; or it may be extraverted towards the Other as site or source of exotic curiosity. In either case what the encounter produces is a shock of the new - new ideas, new cultural texts that challenge the inherited corpus, and forms of engagement with the real in which the desire to know no longer depends for its satisfaction on iterative methods of reading.

Today, readers will not need reminding, the sense of scholarly apprenticeship and creative vocation is mired in the decidedly more profane drives of career. The disciplines of reading are increasingly subsumed under the pursuit of discipleship, the formation of rival schools of interpretation centred not just on canonical texts but on iconic authors. Under this code the main way to make your way up the ladder is to align yourself with a particular clique centred around a 'big name' brand and to demonstrate that you have mastered its distinctive style and ethos. Initiation and ingratiation here become merged in a single rite of passage, typically these days in the coming out of your first publication in a peer reviewed journal. Of course where peers review, rivalry is never far away. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint intellectual gang formation is an all too familiar story: oedipal dynamics hitherto embedded in patriarchal orders of knowledge being displaced into a struggle between rival pretenders over the intellectual succession. The disciples square up against the followers of rival 'names' only then to fall out amongst themselves over the 'true interpretation of the

founders' work, the whole process of ambivalence being overdetermined by the emotional need for each new generation to assert its privileged access to the zeitgeist by rubbishing the achievements of the 'old guard'.

At a personal rather than institutional level, the tension between vocation and career, or apprenticeship and inheritance can still constitute a major moral dilemma: whether it is nobler in the mind to hold to the difficult path of independent craftsmanship or creative endeavour and run the risk of falling out of favour with the intellectual fashion houses; or whether it is more sensible to make your fortune by outgunning or outrunning your fellow bratpackers, and by opposing, join them, that is the question on which many a memoir of the 'self made' writer turns.

But however well this works as a dramatic device the terms of the dilemma itself are rapidly becoming obsolete. In Academe the abolition of tenure, and the introduction of short-term teaching and research contracts is dismantling the career structure founded on collegiate loyalty or reputation. The advent of the 'scholar entrepreneur' as a role model for young aspirants is one sign of these new times. The aim of holding down any academic post now becomes to accumulate as much intellectual capital as one can in order to move on and transfer it to another more prestigious and better paying institution as quickly as possible. Equally the subsuming of what used to be called the fine, or high arts within today's creative industries has tended to assimilate even the most anarchic aesthetic impulse to the profit motives of the small business enterprise. Neither an avant garde nor a bohemian subculture is required to keep this party going, only the continuing interest of the media. And now that almost every established writer has an agent, and with a proliferation of residencies, 'creativity teaching' and prizes to compete for, each piece of work, whatever its personal source of inspiration is likely to be part of a considered career move.

So the question becomes is it possible for wannabe academics or writers to still pursue a 'career' as a horses for courses race to the top despite the absence of a stable structure? Or do we have to adopt the other (pre and postmodern ) sense of the word - careering about from project to project, reinventing ourselves as we go, in grotesque parody of Marx's vision of what the world would be like when people controlled their own destinies?

#### THE RISE AND FALL OF THE POSTMODERN ACADEMY

In *One Market Under God* Thomas Frank has shown us how the values and even institutions of 1960s counter culture came to power the creative industries of the 1980s; en route the gurus of 'new age' capitalism ushered in a form of pseudo non coercive management based on maximising individual initiative, information networking and peer group pressure to drive up productivity. The 'inner foreman' was hailed as a far more effective goad than the carrot and stick approach favoured by Fordist line managers. The result, as devotees of 'The Office' will know, was a happy clappy

workplace culture which hollowed out any real grounds of human solidarity whilst barely repressing a sense of profound alienation operating under its surface bonhomie.

Yet this is only one part of the story. It was the development of that peculiar epistemological panic known as postmodernism amongst the radicalised 'post 68' generation of university students and teachers that has provided the central reference point for debates about the impact of globalisation upon national cultures and economies. The direction which these debates have taken and their impact on intellectual life both inside and outside the Academy turns on a paradox: a movement originating in a largely philosophical critique of the totalising abstractions of Western Reason, and their tyrannical application to other societies and cultures, succeeded in creating an epistemological order premised on a 'flexible' and 'knowing' subjectivity perfectly adapted to the requirements of a fully marketised knowledge economy, an economy which, its advocates argue, has been at the cutting edge of globalisation since the 1980s.

To understand what role the Academy has played, as a crucial point of mediation between the organisation of knowledge and the economy, we have to go back to what it was in the Western university that the 1960s student movement objected to: namely its role in promoting an elitist version of the national culture as a civilising mission while advocating norms of scientific rationality that turned out, on closer inspection, to be a thinly disguised imperialist agenda. The organisation of these elements into an administered system of knowledge that was at once hierarchical and bureaucratic, ruled over as it was by the infamous 'pedagogic gerontocracy' was a special source of outrage. Yet in fact, saving the oedipal idioms of youth culture, the main thrust of the critique lay quite elsewhere. It turned on the ways the liberal university was being transformed into a modern corporate enterprise, sacrificing its intellectual autonomy to the research needs of the military industrial complex. So what was being attacked at one moment - the persistence of 'Ivory Tower' attitudes - was at another being implicitly supported as a defence against surrender to market forces. As we will see this same ambivalence was to shape much more recent responses to the 'crisis of the university'.

More immediately the impact of the days of rage was to empower the student, not as a revolutionary subject but as a sovereign consumer. From the early 1970s, as higher education began to expand beyond its traditionally narrow class and race banding, student demand increasingly dictated what was taught. Once disciplines were marketised, only those which attracted sufficient student numbers could establish a critical academic mass and hence sustain a quality staff research culture. So what was teachable has ultimately come to determine what is researchable. At the same time only those institutions with sufficient academic prestige to claim honorary 'Humboldt status' (that is to say, community of scholarship trappings plus state of the art library and science labs) could properly compete in the global

marketplace for staff and students. The newly upgraded universities were dependent, as they had been before as polytechnics, on recruiting local student intakes and staff who had a special commitment to teach them.

There was another shift in the axis of knowledge power. In the 1960s and 1970s the 'worldly' disciplines of political and economic science, radicalised by the rediscovery of Marxism amongst a younger generation of scholars, displaced 'unworldly' philosophy and mathematics as centres of intellectual excitement and innovation. Yet once their Marxist moment was over - and it did not last long - politics and economics faculties quickly took a more utilitarian turn, often amalgamating into Business Schools, where links with industry, commerce and government could be pursued unfettered by the toils of ideology critique.

In the late 1970s, in the spaces first opened up and then evacuated by the revival of Marxian political economy, postmodern philosophy developed its critique of knowledge power and the aestheticisation of everyday life. The postmodern turn coincided with the emergence of Cultural Studies as a new academic configuration, and the fate of the two has been closely bound up ever since. 'Po-Mo' enabled Cultural Studies to assert a distinctive identity and to edge out the longer established - and hence ideologically compromised - 'Humboldtian' disciplines. French po-mo philosophers became international celebrities almost overnight - reinventing the intellectual as a global/local commentator on the post everything Zeitgeist, whilst philosophy departments either joined the fray or went into rapid meltdown. At the same time Po-Mo connected Cultural Studies to wider developments within the visual arts, literature and the media which were crystallising into a market oriented cultural economy outside the university.

There was another sense in which Cultural Studies provided a bridge between the new knowledge paradigm and global economic imperatives. It was not an inter-disciplinary project in the strict sense in so far as it did not issue from any argument between or within disciplines that studied culture (that is to say, anthropology, history, sociology, linguistics, literature, and psychology). Rather CS opportunistically appropriated (some would say cannibalised) discursive elements from each and all of these intellectual traditions (especially literature and anthropology) and integrated them syncretically into a common syntax focussed around a set of ideological topics or themes. This fitted in well with the priorities of the new academic enterprise culture in so far as topic focussed studies lent themselves to niche marketing. At the same time the radical impetus which Cultural Studies gave to the questioning of the Eurocentric and patriarchal orders of knowledge associated with the Humboldt disciplines resonated with the multicultural disposition of the post 1968 student body formed by the widening of access to higher education.

But by the same token the break up of disciplinary knowledge in the arts and humanities created a space for new modularised forms of examinable knowledge in the Higher Education curriculum. The 'hybridity' of CS lent

itself admirably to these new formats which in turn harmonised very well with styles of knowledge presentation and information networking being demanded by employers in the new economy.<sup>2</sup>

A colleague of mine once described the modular curriculum as being about students learning less and less about more and more, from teachers who know more and more about less and less. However radical the initial content of Cultural Studies, the form of its academic transmission remained on the conservative side of knowledge power.<sup>3</sup> In Basil Bernstein's terms its hidden curriculum entails a shift from strong to weak classification, whilst its mode of pedagogic delivery moves from weak to strong framing. Modularisation actually shores up the specialised pedagogic devices which enable teachers to instruct and examine students in the competent performance of routine procedures of knowledge impression management: essay writing and portfolio presentation. And then, once you start to vocationalise the modular curriculum you can generate a whole range of hitherto unheard of, academic specialisms offering flexi-degrees in everything from surfing with equestrian studies to hotel management and comparative cuisine.

In principle, of course, postmodernism challenges the foundations of pedagogic authority. A hermeneutics of generalised suspicion regarding the proclaimed truth of texts, once transferred to an educational context, tends to undermine faith in all sources of received wisdom. Logically the pedagogic task becomes to transfer to students the critical skills needed to de-mystify or de-construct the subtext of what they are being taught. Some of the more radical exponents of Po-Mo did in fact try to do just this, albeit in forms of argumentation of such theoretical density as to render them largely unintelligible to their intended student audience!

In practice Cultural Studies helped to institutionalise postmodernism as a corpus of texts to be studied within the Academy, thus neutralising its more subversive pedagogic implications. Along with this textualisation went a disengagement from empirical research. Conceptually the social was dissolved into its various media of collective representation, and methodologically there was a flight from any unmediated encounter with the Other. Once culture was enclosed within itself, either by being disconnected from the social, or by dissolving the social into it, the way was open to retreat from the politics of situated knowledge in favour of growing involvement with the ideoscapes and mediaflows of the global cultural economy. 'Have Cultural theory - Will Travel' became the visiting card of the first fully-fledged intelligentsia to be thrown up by new age capitalism in its own image. None of this was achieved without a prolonged struggle against the 'old guard' who held on to Gramsci or Raymond Williams as their guiding lights, but the outcome was never in doubt. The textual turn saw off the critics and walled Cultural Studies up in the library, from whence, some of us have not ceased attempting to liberate it.

To summarise the argument so far: postmodernism far from destroying

2. Let us not forget that modularisation was first developed as a way introducing principles of flexible specialisation into the organisation of production in the post Fordist factory.

3. For a discussion of this point see Francis Mulhern *Culture/MetaCulture*, Verso, London, 2000.

the authority of the Academy, as some critics warned it might, facilitated its transition from an elite quasi autonomous institution of national learning into a fully fledged consumer enterprise driven by corporate branding and marketing strategies. Cultural Studies played a key role in this process. Often behind the backs of its most passionate advocates it provided a conduit through which Po-Mo ideas could infiltrate and destabilise the Humboldtian curriculum. By powerfully legitimating the bricolage degree in a way which paralleled the strategies of knowledge management being adopted by the new economy, and by developing a style of niche marketing that fitted in with the new academic enterprise culture, CS helped to break the mould set by a more rigid division of academic labour and, however unintentionally and indirectly opened up the way for the introduction of new structures of university governance based on administrative and commercial priorities rather than academic ones.

A parallel could be drawn here with the way the creative industries supported a form of economic regeneration that facilitated the transition from the industrial to the post industrial city. The artists and squatters who moved into the decaying infrastructure of the de-industrialised inner city armed with slogans about community renewal proved to be the advance guard for a process of gentrification which turned these same areas into cultural quarters where only a rich cosmopolitan elite could afford to live. In same way postmodern organisation theory, in the name of promoting intellectual synergy has provided a rationale for the introduction of 'flexibility' as a key performance indicator of academic excellence. It is to this new knowledge managerialism we must now turn.

#### THE CRISIS OF THE NEO-LIBERAL UNIVERSITY

The 'postmodern' turn coincided with the spread of audit culture into every nook and cranny of academic life as the British government attempted to steer the university into positive, rather than negative engagement with its wider economic environment. Under these circumstances academics, postmodernists or not, had little alternative (if they wanted to keep their jobs) but to go along with moves that reinforced their control over the immediate pedagogic process and hence over students, at the expense of surrendering their power to shape the role of the university in the wider society.

The timing and logic of the transition was impeccable. Through the 1990s many commentators pointed out that the more central knowledge was becoming to Western economy and society, the more marginal the university was becoming as a locus for its production and dissemination. Neither the library nor the laboratory need to be based on campus; universities could not compete with museums or on line archives when it came to making knowledge publicly accessible, while think tanks beat them to the draw when it came to winning friends and influencing people in the

corridors of power.

Something had to be done, and that something was called, what else, 'modernisation'. The aim in Britain was to resolve the crisis of the university by gearing its different functions much more tightly into specialised niches in the knowledge economy. According to this dispensation the top ranked 'research universities' (that is to say, where there were existing major in-house research facilities supported by a critical mass of internationally rated scholars) will continue to educate the future governing elites of the network society according to the latest inter-disciplinary protocols; meanwhile the task of the less well endowed institutions is to train up routine 'knowledge workers' by means of a thoroughly vocationalised curriculum while undertaking some applied research or as it is now called 'knowledge transfer activity' to help balance the budget.

'Modernisation' introduced standardised measures of academic productivity within a rigidified two tier HE system and en route intensified processes of academic credential inflation. It also brought greater interference in the way universities, and even faculties are run as the 'disciplines' of the market and public accountancy penetrate into the everyday conduct of teaching and research. A few scholarly eccentrics may be tolerated, especially if they are inspirational teachers or bring in research money, but the new movers and shakers are evangelical bureaucrats wielding mission statements and checklists and talking in acronyms. It all makes for interesting campus novels, but means that many universities are increasingly stressful and unpleasant places in which to work.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that many erstwhile 1960s student radicals, who have now graduated to positions of power within the Academy have viewed these developments with considerable alarm. Especially if they are located in the 'polyversities', as many are, they find themselves arguing for a return to the academic gold standard (alias the RAE) as a means of resisting the dilution of their disciplines, the de-skilling of their teaching and the devaluing of their research knowledge. This defence of the Academy has taken two forms: maintaining increased vigilance over procedural academic knowledge, and its modes of transmission and evaluation; and defending a 'pure' research culture in which peer review and what has been called para-citology - the authorisation of ones own texts by constant referential and often deferential citation of others - become the defining methods of quality control.

This bizarre mixture of monologic pedagogy and compulsive intertextuality has unfortunately only served to intensify professional anxieties of influence and rivalry; it leads, for example, to the practice of academic cloning whereby each staff caucus strengthens it's niche in the academic market place by only recruiting those who share similar research interests or attitudes; it also tends to produce heavily defended academic subjects hostile to the emergence of any thinking that upsets (de-centres?) the subjects/positions in which they have such a strong career investment. In other words

it results in a culture strongly opposed to any intellectual innovation not of its own making.

It would not be the first, or the last time that political radicals of yesteryear have turned into ‘the people we warned our children against becoming’, as pension rights assume greater importance in life plans than street cred. Those of us who began with the promise or the threat to become the gravediggers of capitalism have found that we have dug our own graves, behind our own backs, first by abolishing the ‘dictatorship of the professoriat’ in defence of a more generous vision of educational possibility that was subsequently exploited as a market opportunity and then by struggling to reinstate it as a last maginot line of defence against the gospel of neo-liberal modernisation preached by government ministers, business tycoons and some Vice Chancellors.

This convoluted trajectory is nowhere more poignantly present than in the current predicament of Cultural Studies. The ancient seats of learning were quick to incorporate postmodern perspectives to enliven their humanities departments, but did not give institutional houseroom to CS as a separate department of knowledge. CS departments did sprout and flourish in the polyversities, but here they have suffered from the increasing vocationalising of the curriculum. Media and increasingly multimedia studies is now increasingly replacing CS in terms of student numbers and prestige: designing websites, or making promo music videos is where the action is, not engaging with complex intellectual debates. In my personal view if CS has a future it may well be in developing a critical but also practical engagement with issues such as urban planning, tourism, heritage and the environment. It will certainly not survive for long as a bastion of postmodern theorisation disengaged from the cultural economy.

## CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

Alongside the developments I have briefly sketched there runs a counter culture, a counter narrative which is worth more of a guided tour than I can manage here. In Europe we might start with the mendicant religious orders of the middle ages, especially the friars whom Gramsci took as his model for the organic intellectual. We might spend some time with the troubadours and wandering scholars, and trace the links between their peregrinations and some of the key itineraries of Renaissance thought. We’d certainly visit Cordoba and listen to the debates between Jewish, Christian and Islamic scholars and scientists for and against Aristotle’s and Plato’s views on the origins of ideas. Later on we might spend time with the encyclopaedists, or the practitioners of Vico’s *gaya scienza*, and mend our fences with maverick thinkers who refused to patent their own ideas or respect other peoples intellectual property rights. Coming up to the present we could summon up a whole cast of tricksters, cyborgs and other intellectual shape shifters who seek to unsettle the distinctions between high and low culture, or

between the discourses of mind, matter and machine.

For all their differences, and they *are* a very motley crew, these figures have a number of common characteristics. One is that they travel light, they carry a version of a laboratory and/or library around in their heads without requiring a great deal of institutional apparatus to sustain their work. Unlike the Professor of Sinology in Elias Canetti's *Auto da Fe* they do not need someone to unpack the books from their heads so they can sleep at nights, Nor are they dependant on expensive equipment to conduct their experiments because the centre of calculation can be the back of an envelope. They take lines of thought for a walk or a song and dance wherever they happen to be - in a jazz group, or a head to head debate, scribbling in their notebooks, or explaining to children why the earth is not the centre of the universe. They form part of a subterranean tradition which links the history of popular curiosity to the counter intuitive procedures of empirical investigation.

The second common feature is an attitude of mind towards the world. It amounts to that anti-systemic system of sceptical engagement with the real that Carlo Ginzburg has called the conjectural method. In his brilliant essay on Freud, Morelli and Sherlock Homes, Ginzberg identifies a set of common semiotic procedures linking the investigative practices of psychoanalysis, pictorial and textual analysis, medical and forensic science, archaeology, ethno-botany, detective stories, and some forms of popular curiosity. In each case an enigmatic and apparently insignificant detail, a footprint, a sudden untoward gesture or throwaway remark, a shard of pottery, a cigarette burn on an armchair, a piece of math or science that does not 'add up', is made to take on a specific and highly overdetermined significance within a wider but still mysterious framework of meaning. This wider picture is at first entirely unknown, but gradually, through the work of piecing together apparently unrelated fragments the hidden pattern emerges, so that they form a coherent narrative which at its best also explains and dissolves the original mystery in a practically useful or aesthetically satisfying way. Curiosity is here provisionally reunited with its object, by a route that is both normative and speculative, strategic and unrepeatable.

Conjectural thinkers need large amounts of 'idle curiosity' and enough time to pursue what might turn out to be totally useless ideas. Nevertheless they pursue a form of inter-disciplinarity that owes nothing to opportunistic syncretism but is strategic to particular purposes of research.

Finally and perhaps most importantly the conjectural method challenges the 'hard' masculinist values of productivity that have come to dominate both library scholarship and laboratory experiment. Instead of measuring the size of your intellect by the length of your CV, or your publications list, it is the precision of the observation, the elegance of the formulation, the quality of engagement with the problem that counts. The muses of both arts and science have always celebrated these 'feminine virtues' associated with the counter intuitive grasp of what is hidden from or goes against the

grain of common sense.

Today far from becoming obsolete, freelance intellectuals continue to find niches, however tenuous and untenured, in the market place of ideas. Of course free spirits are all too easily captured by the spirit of free enterprise, and it certainly does not do to romanticise the situation of people who often eke out a living on the margins of Academe. But perhaps there is also a way of employing this impulse of rational curiosity to rather more sustained purpose, to renew intellectual life in the university itself.

#### RETURN TO THE SECRET GARDEN

What would happen if we put a group of conjectural thinkers together in a latter day Macy Symposium and asked them to reformulate the idea of the university in a way that neither harked back to the Ivory Tower elitism of the old Liberal academy nor espoused the crude commercialism of its neo-liberal successor? What might *this* third way look like?

The group might start by looking at research culture. They might note that customarily populations who live within easy travelling distance of a university campus can expect to find almost every aspect of their personal and social lives come under investigation. Their health and marriage patterns, their eating and reading habits, their sex lives and political opinions all are grist to the academic mill. Their role as informants is simply to provide the raw data which is transformed by students and staff into intellectual capital, accruing to the professional reputation of the researchers and to the public name - and meaning - of the university as a centre of academic excellence. This process is often mystified by research rhetorics which talk about the long term benefits to the wider community, or even to the informants themselves, but such payoffs are neither estimable, nor do they enter into the short term calculations of those who volunteer their services. They do so, in the main, because their role as informants potentially offers a form of legitimate if still peripheral participation in the production of knowledge, a role they have been otherwise denied by the educational system.

So the conclusion might be that if academic research is to do more than treat people as 'lab fodder' then it must build on this starting point and encourage them to play a much bigger part in its design, delivery and dissemination. It might perhaps be better, and more accurate, for example, to describe them as consultants rather than informants, and indeed to consult them about the kinds of research questions to be asked, to inquire into their own conjectures as to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, and to, at the very least, treat them as active subjects in the co-construction of the research story. In the case of the very old, the very young, the very ill or the very mad, this may not be possible, but such a dialogical approach is more practicable than is often allowed for in the standard text books on research methodology.

The embedding of empirical research in strategies for building the capacity for critical conjecture within the communities served by the university thus becomes one key way of widening access to higher education. Another might be to reform the teaching process so that it transfers research skills to students in a way that enables them to engage more directly in tackling the problems facing these same communities. For example, the Shopfront project run by University for Technology and Science in Sydney, has run a successful government funded scheme which provides training and support for research students who want to ground their PhD studies in intellectual work that is of direct use and benefit to disadvantaged minorities in the city. Through a lengthy process of negotiation a contract is drawn up between the two parties, guaranteeing on one side the need of the student to pursue research without interference and with the full co-operation of the community and on the other the need of the community to have the issues they want raised fully addressed and communicated in a useable form in this work. The students end up with a PhD and a lot of professional experience they would not otherwise have; the community ends up with reports that provide them with some clear guidelines for future action or with environmental and cultural projects that contribute directly to improving the quality of their lives.

Roskilde University in Denmark runs an undergraduate programme which also involves an active problem solving pedagogy, organising the students into interdisciplinary research teams from the word go. Building on these first principles, our think tank might recommend a foundation year in which students from arts, humanities and science backgrounds are mixed together and have a core programme of lectures and seminars in which mathematicians, musicians, architects, linguists, psychologists, medical sociologists and so on, all discuss their own research attitude and its big questions: why is something the way it is and not some other way, how did it get like that, what if anything would have made for a different result and what can I interestingly say about it. The 'it' might be Godel's theorem, or the law of Tort, Mozart's requiem or the leaning tower of Pisa, autism or the Black Death, environmental pollution, or institutional racism. What the something is, is less important, *at this stage*, than the fact that the students are learning the basic, and highly transferable skills, of a conjectural approach.

This might be followed by an intermediate year based in faculty studies, where students learn the elementary structures of scholarly and experimental disciplines, a propaedeutics in which the generative grammar of a specific area of knowledge is acquired. Needless to say in this multicultural university faculties would not be organised along the old divisions of nature and culture, mind and body, individual and society that have so bedevilled Western thought. For example one faculty might bring together studies in biology and biography, putting neuroscience, psychoanalysis and narratology into concerted conversation around the development of an ecological model of



mind - not just for the intellectual excitement it might generate, but because it might lead to, say, a better understanding of certain memory disorders.

The final year might be spent in small research teams working on a collaborative project led by a senior member of staff, worrying at a specific research question, learning more about both ways of conceptualising issues and empirical procedures, learning how to think across as well as within disciplines, how to write up reports, and present findings to both expert and lay audiences. The questions to be addressed might also be related to specific problems identified as being important to particular communities of concern.

None of this is exactly new. Many of these ideas have been tried and tested and found to work and there are examples of conjectural pedagogics to be found scattered across the HE curriculum. But they are rarely allowed to cohere into a deliberative approach or to permeate the whole curriculum along the lines which Michel Serres suggested in the *Troubadour of Knowledge*. In his book, Serres critiques the current shift from the journey to the destination (alias the performance indicator) as the telos of education, a shift which has transformed the pedagogue from an intellectual guide and mentor to what the current OED entry variously describes as: a preceptor, usually with negative connotations: a dogmatist, or in J.S. Mill's famous term: a member of the pedantocracy. In other words someone who tells but no longer shows.

Serres argues that we need to return to the original Greek meaning of the word pedagogy, in a way that makes teaching and research into a single indissoluble intellectual project. In the original Greek meaning of the term the pedagogue is the one who does the school run, who not only takes the student to and from the place of instruction, but who makes the journey itself into an educational experience: not going in a straight line from A to B, but wandering off the beaten track, challenging assumptions, questioning everything that makes you feel at home even and especially in your own sense of alienation or otherness. Attempting to return pedagogy to its founding moment Serres writes to his imaginary student, his reader, in the following terms:

Study, work, something will always come of it. And after? For there to be an after, I mean some kind of future that goes beyond a copy, leave the library (and I would have to add the laboratory) - to run in the fresh air. If you remain inside you will never write anything but books made of books (I would add, experiment with others' experiments). That knowledge, excellent in itself, contributes to instruction, but the goal of the other kind is something other than itself. Depart, go out, become many, brave the outside world, split off somewhere else. These are the first foreign things, the varieties of alterity, initial means of being exposed. For there is no learning without exposure, often dangerous, to the other, to foreign things.



This principle deliberately applies to all aspects of intellectual work. If the distinction between public intellectual and private scholar, researcher and teacher is here abandoned, it is not in order to reduce them to the lowest common denominator but rather to assert their highest common factor as bearers of a shared principle of curiosity about the world both inside and outside the mind, that constitutes knowledge's Other Scene.

As students - and especially those eternal students who are researchers - we need to find mentors, whether inside or outside the Academy, who can help us lose and find our way along this path. Here is how one such figure, a senior administrator, was recently described to me:

He treats the university a bit like a garden. There are all these plants needing water. It may takes some time for him to get round to all of them, but each gets its turn. He's likely to take as much if not more trouble with a prickly cactus which may be stubbornly refusing to flower, as he does with some exotic bloom that he might just think needs a bit of pruning back. He sometimes takes risks, puts hardy annuals next to perennials, a cactus next to violets, he's sometimes a bit remiss about weeding, it doesn't always come off, but you'd be amazed how often it does.

Gardening metaphors are always a bit suspect, given the role they have played historically in naturalising positions of self cultivation on the part of our national elite. Yet there are few places where such a rich ecology of knowledge, drawing on and combining such various arts and sciences, connecting popular culture and professional expertise , can be said to flourish across such a broad range of social sites. And perhaps it is a better model than most for the kind of a university we might all want to work in, somewhere to nurture our best hopes for making the worlds we so variously inhabit more interesting and more shareable with our students, our colleagues and our fellow citizens.