What could the university be?

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If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye [. . .] that sees possibility ever. — Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or

The many worlds of the pluriversity

The name Argos, allied in Greek mythology with the epithet panoptes (all-seeing) as Argus panoptes, implies an unwearying watcher, and, as the primordial 'lord of the neatherd' (herdsman), the very name of the land he watches. (The Greek town named in his honour still exists today.) But we two writers, both of us Pākehā, cannot help but see our land differently. We are not in Europe now, or rather, the 'Europe' we occupy is the powerful penumbra of a differently centred place, a place called Aotearoa ('The [land of the] long white cloud,' namely, New Zealand), located in a 'sea of islands,' Te Moana nui a Kiwa ('The great ocean of Kiwa,' namely, the Pacific Ocean). To find ourselves in this position suggests a double occupation, whereby Europeanisation, or more specifically, Anglosphericism, has had to accommodate itself to an already differently occupied place and its larger Oceanic setting. Such a pre-occupation cannot but make us think geotheretically—and, in turn, think in terms of other centres and on other grounds than those of the northern axis of Europe or Anglo-America.

In this spirit, we ask after the grounds of the university—and the grounds, literal and figurative, of the university in which we find ourselves. (Strictly speaking, the land asks us to think about it, for 'the land has eyes,' to borrow the title of Vilsoni Heroniko's film about Rotuma.)

For us, this asking after grounds is what a university does or, rather, ought to do. We see every 'class,' or university occasion, real or virtual, as subtended by the deeper set of questions raised by Māori scholar Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal: 'Who am I? What is this world I find myself in? What am I to do?' Thus, the 'ground' of the university, unlike that of any other social institution, is not given in the sense of being preordained or pre-programmed ('prescribed'), but given by asking after grounds ('constructed'). That is, it is constituted as such by this critically deliberative activity, which we would argue must be interactive (alert to its setting), interpersonal, collaborative and collective. The land on which our university lies makes it a pluriversity, a place of many worlds—and makes it plain that the university per se ought to be seen likewise. So, we aim to give this land sides, to acknowledge that it is whenua taupouhetohe ('contested land').

Furthermore, for us, this implies that the university as pluriversity is world-making: it enacts a constructive 'worlding' or possibilism, in other words, neither the positivism of knowledge production that is blind to its own purposes nor the probabilism of the techno-capital university (the University 2.0) and its taken-as-given normative imperatives. Possibilism, as Albert Hirschman writes, 'consists in the discovery of paths, however narrow, leading to an outcome that appears to be foreclosed on the basis of probabilistic [or positivistic] reasoning alone.'

This is the university we see: the university as a 'garden of forking paths', of paths of possibility.
The one world of econometrics

The normative imperatives, or scripts, of the University 2.0 could be acronymed as ICE (innovation, creativity, and enterprise): \(^{11}\) we ask not only why we live in an age of acronyms and when this came about—along with the econometrics of technical capitalism (ETC), no doubt—but also what these terms and their acronyms actually mean, and when it was that they assumed the normative power of givens. Are these scripts, we ask, themselves ‘innovative,’ ‘creative’ or ‘entrepreneurial,’ especially when they are every other university’s imperatives, and therefore globally convergent and generic? Is it innovative, for instance, to follow imperatives to be innovative? To us, this normative drive is better understood as econometrically determined programming, or prescription, whereby the measure of performance itself determines what counts, for example, as innovation, or, to put it another way, knowledge creation becomes knowledge management. We reject this kind of ‘endstopped’ thinking, which reduces thinking to mere calculation in advance \(^{12}\) and participation to the managed consensus of ‘consultation,’ in which even the strongest objections are considered merely ‘positive feedback’ and evidence of ‘robust’ processes.

Instead of simply executing and extending such scripts, we ask after their rationales. In doing so, we suspend such norms and make them available for deliberation by those whom they concern and to whom they matter. We do not allow norms to simply govern the action to be taken or the process to be followed, that is, the rule to be applied. Instead, we reconstruct them, along with the university itself, on the basis of this questioning. In such deliberation, the consensus such norms constitute—an ‘anthropological bedrock’, in Paolo Virno’s terms \(^{13}\)—is itself opened up for inquiry and other worlds (or ‘paths’, indeed) considered that give the ‘one world’ of the globally convergent and generic University 2.0 sides, options, openings. The university 2.0, unlike our pluriversity, lacks contest and context. Driven by econometric scripts (‘Globalise or die!’; ‘Follow others or fall behind!’), it is a place that lacks critical imagination—that cannot offer alternate visions—and that can offer neither students nor society the wherewithal for personal or collective transformation. In it, people think ‘outside the box,’ which is to say in ‘innovative’, ‘creative’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ (ICE) clichés (crystallised thinking), \(^{14}\) because they cannot think what a box is or does.

Teaching the emergency

Here is where the Arts, supposedly redundant due to their econometric deficiency, actually come in handy. If anyone knows anything about innovation, creativity, and enterprise—not to mention critique—it is scholars in the Arts, for whom these are everyday matters of practical concern. The capacity generated by Arts-based critical imagination, which has of course addressed numerous social crises in the past, is not negligible, however difficult it might be to measure in terms of economic—or social—outputs or outcomes. Indeed, the current global crises, financial, ecological, technological and military, suggest that teaching and learning is taking place in a global ‘state of emergency’. \(^{15}\) We therefore advocate teaching the emergency in two senses: with these critical emergencies in mind, and with a view to producing emergent lines of inquiry. With regard to the second sense, it is our task, as Walter Benjamin puts it, ‘to bring about a real state of emergency’. \(^{16}\) Thus, we believe the Arts are more, not less, important than the Sciences to our shared social futures.

The more general crisis of humanity is a matter of philosophy, which is to say, of how we ought live together, and not simply a matter of technical solutions to problems of population, food supply, global warming and so on. (What is the technical solution, for instance, to global surveillance, which technology itself gave rise to?) The shift in the weighting of research funding to STEM (Science,
The university beside itself Argos Aotearoa Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines, as is happening under current Government policy, may equally be viewed as simply an increase in investment in universities by the corporate interests that stand to benefit from such a partnership. Similarly, the increased emphasis on research in the 'research [i.e., richer] university', may be seen as the abandonment of the university's mission to 'educate' in favour of 'quality assurance' and outsourced (adjunct) or tickbox (constructively aligned) teaching aligned with faculty goals and aims, themselves aligned with the university's strategic mission and overseen by managers responsive to the spreadsheet rather than to the classroom.

Furthermore, we would also advocate using the Arts to produce deliberative knowledge (this is the Arts' version of 'Mode 2' knowledge). Undeliberative teaching, subject as it is to econometrics, misses the very purpose of the enhanced means of measure it serves. The reduction of intelligence to computable information is part of the general crisis of humanity: today, all that is solid melts into the data cloud. Our first response is to address the misbegotten language of the terms in which social crises are articulated, and to thereby give sides to issues that cannot be resolved by more or better programming. This 'problematising' involves taking language literally, and taking the buzz out of buzz-words (transparent, excellent, robust; experience, quality, benchmark; etc.). It involves asking what templates and their boxes do, which is to say, every other survey, review, report, outline or summary feedback form, and what rationale might drive the pre-programmed scripts they unfold (what pass for meetings, in universities as elsewhere, also merely require people to be present and to implement their scripts, certainly not to deliberate on the grounds of the meeting itself). To take such language literally, then, is to ask after the letter of such scripts. The university can hardly be a place where this, but not anything else, escapes pause, reflection and deliberation. We therefore take the grounds of our institutional practices, as well as the grounds of all other knowledge, quite literally. We realise that this literality is heretical because it exposes the empty consensus of doctrine—in this case, the feedback loop of managed consensus (to give an example of literality as heresy, St Francis of Assisi exposed the interest of the Church in feudal property relations by taking literally the vow of poverty).

**Thinking the emergency**

Our literal method takes us beyond critique in the twentieth-century sense of unveiling ideology, premised on a caricature of Kantian transcendental idealism, to something that we might call *emulation*, or, to misread Alain Badiou, 'immanent articulation' (emulating the immanent 'agency of the letter', perhaps). This is an action in and though which the inner contradictions of normative imperatives are revealed (i.e. the 'ill-logics' of 'a-human' rationales). By emulation, we mean literal replication, designed to induce a certain reflexivity (from the Latin reflexivus, 're-turning') that is actually a re-purposing. The university, we think, is an institution for generating social purposes conducive to social emergence, that is, flourishing and transformation, generating such purposes not *ex nihilo*, 'out of nothing', but *de novo*, 'anew' (genuine innovation, we would say). As Ronald Barnett argues, 'a university that takes seriously both the world's interconnectedness and the university's interconnectedness with the world' is *ecological*, a university that 'does not merely take its networking seriously but engages actively with the world in order to bring about a better world.' It is, to paraphrase Barnett, at once hopeful and critical: as he puts it, 'a university neither in-itself (the research university) nor for-itself (the entrepreneurial university) but for-others.'

The university is thus failing in its true mission if it does not prompt conversation about matters of local public and political import, that is, if it does not pose problems for language—and business—as usual (the public is itself constructed as the voice of contest and context in this conversation). We do not simply mean to provoke or persuade; instead, we wish to prompt others to consider what provokes us and to become engaged in the same issues. Our object is to give
them pause for thought as an act of social affirmation, where what is taken to be 'social' is constituted as such by a collective reflection and deliberation. The university is conceivably any place where this occurs. In the actual university that we inhabit, we therefore value moments of pause: error, digression or procrastination. Such interstices are, as it were, cracks in the bedrock of the university that allow for creativity and criticism that is at once accidental and opportune.

Making up the pluriversity

Finally, we are interested in rules, or orthography (from the Greek orthographia, 'straight writing'). We do not mean that social rules should simply be followed—such rules are modelled by but not reducible to language—but, again, that they should be asked after, and their human purposes brought into clear view. The 'anthropological bedrock'25 of any social consensus is a set of 'crystallized' rules.26 Our own 'purpose' is not simple replication, or rule recognition, though this is part of our teaching (of writing). It is to investigate the human capacity to make and break rules.27 In this sense, the pluriversity bears some resemblance to the Māori whare tapere, or house of games.28 In learning how rules can be made, and not simply recognised, we recognise the human capacity for the transformation of social and natural worlds. Herein lies the wherewithal that we call worlding or possibilism. Both the 'where' and the 'with' of this wherewithal are important to a university that is sensitive to contest and context, which is to say, to a local place and its peoples, and to the many worlds it withholds from view. A real university is always situated, always face-to-face, despite the technological utopia and technical feasibility of e-learning and cloud teaching (the logic of university administration means that it should entirely outsource teaching, so that students would download superior lectures from Harvard, and make all university employees administrators). Otherwise, reflection on rules is reduced to the function of a programme: an app for critical thinking.

The human animal is not only rule-bound, but also rule-finding. In the first instance, the making of rules may have involved making the most of an accident: a tree that provides shelter becomes a house; a rock that serves to cut becomes a tool. Upon reflection, such crystallized rules can be reconstructed to re-purpose their original human purpose, for good or ill, which process exhibits the humanity of design rather than the ascriptive force of the tool or the letter (such templates imply a proscribed or pre-inscribed outcome). We find that focusing on error or digression or procrastination in order to opportunise accidents is critically and creatively engaging. We consider the possible worlds in terms of which such accidents make sense in unaccountable or unaccounted for ways, and we reconstruct the university in the light of these worlds. The erratological (from the Latin errare, 'to wander, roam, ramble' or 'to be mistaken') engagement we advocate—a kind of 'wandering thought'—takes all sorts of forms: in 'asking after' rules, it can deform, defuse, assume power in alternate forms, and so on.29 We say: perform the university, emulate it, occupy it, teach it with an 'eye [. . .] that sees possibility ever', in the words of our epigraph.30 This is the joy of rule-making and rule-breaking—after all, humanum est errare: 'to err is human.' In and through such activity, the university turns out to be many worlds: a pluriversity. Its future is what we make of it.

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3. Interestingly, the geonym “Europe” derives from the Greek eurús, meaning “wide, broad” and óps, meaning “eye, face,” hence Európē, “wide-gazing,” “broad of aspect.”

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7 Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, People Need Nourishment (Not Judgment): Presentation to the Apostolate hui, Catholic Church, Palmerston North Diocese, 22 July 2006, web.


11 Note that The University of Auckland’s Business School is the founder of, and now partner in, the Icehouse, a “business growth centre” described as “development factory of owner-managers and entrepreneurs who will shape the future of New Zealand’s economy”; see Partners: The Icehouse, Icehouse, 2008, http://www.theicehouse.co.nz/partners/, 4 Aug. 2013.


22 For re-purposing, see Sean Sturm and Stephen Turner, ‘The University Beside Itself’ paper presented at The Creative University: Education and the Creative Economy, Knowledge Formation, Global Creation and the Imagination Conference, University of Waikato, Hamilton 15–16 August, 2012; forthcoming.


25 Virno, Multitude p. 115.

26 Gehlen, ‘Crystallization.’


29 The neologism ‘erratology’ combines — in what we are aware is an etymological error — two senses: erring, that is, wandering, roaming or rambling, or being mistaken (errare in Latin), and ground, discourse or thought (logos or -logia in Greek); see Sturm and Turner, “Erratology.”