

The Promise of Untimely Meditations: Reflections on University Education in the Early Twenty-First Century

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Confinements Old

Within the last few decades higher education internationally has become increasingly regarded as a strategic resource for economic and scientific advance. Reference to the 'entrepreneurial university' has become commonplace in public discourse. This is not to say, however, that universities, as places of learning, have become recast *tout ensemble* as places of production. Were the change as resounding as this, the scope to pursue any teaching and research that was not tied to some economic or social policy imperative would have all but disappeared. The resulting discontent would be difficult to weather by authorities in democratic societies. What has been underway is something more urbane and more intricate than a crass inversion in the purposes of higher learning. Mirroring developments in society more widely, a new utilitarianism, now in a technological key, has been confidently establishing itself as the conventional wisdom of educational policy debates. (EU Commission 1996, 2000, 2005; OECD 2004a, 2004b, 2005). It is clear that this new utilitarianism is fuelled by the economic globalisation that has become dominant, especially since the end of the Cold War. What is less clear is that this utilitarianism, as a newly-established public wisdom, is also itself a major cultural force that fuels the further advance of such globalisation. Far from being an abrupt revolution or a passing trend or fashion, I believe that what we are witnessing here is a historic cultural shift over a generation or two, possibly of comparable significance to the historic ascendancy of a religious world view that was accomplished over a much longer period in medieval Western civilisation. It is worth recalling that it was such a shift, theological rather than commercial in character, that brought universities into being in the first instance.

Historical studies illustrate that cultural ascendancies invariably have their own orthodoxies, explicit or otherwise. For instance, for a medieval scholar to question the established orthodoxies of Western Christendom was to bring trouble on one's head, or at times to bring powerful ecclesiastical censure on one's intellectual legacy. Famous examples include Peter Abelard of Paris (1079-1142), Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) or even Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) for a period. But history also shows that even the most powerful orthodoxies can wane, be overthrown, or otherwise become eclipsed. The authoritarian restrictions on higher learning that prevailed in pre-modern times were successfully challenged by the ideals of freedom of thought championed by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Such ideals, particularly in the form of aspirations for academic freedom, made significant progress during the nineteenth century and became increasingly associated with the rise of the liberal university internationally. The liberal university here is to be distinguished from the Catholic university of modern history that succeeded its medieval predecessor, such as that established under the rectorship of J. H. Newman in Dublin in 1854. Though embracing the goals of liberal learning, Newman's model of the Catholic university retained a co-ordinating role for theology as the 'supreme science' and also placed constraints on advanced research. The paradigm example of the modern liberal university is the University of Berlin, founded by Wilhelm von Humboldt during the period 1808-1810. Features of the liberal university which became widely recognised thereafter include the combination of advanced research

with research-informed teaching in the same institution, and the freedom from distractions or interferences that would disfigure either of these purposes.

But the intellectual aristocracy of many of the liberal universities provoked attacks in due course from new quarters. Already in the nineteenth century pressures were being exerted by commercial interests which sought graduates whose learning was tailored to the demands of industry, and such pressures became much more widespread during the twentieth century. In 1918 Thorstein Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* provided many incisive criticisms of the distortions which beset scholarly enquiry as a consequence of 'the conduct of universities by businessmen'. But if lofty ideals of liberal scholarship were being curtailed by commercial pressures from without, trouble on a large scale was also brewing from within. During the comparatively affluent 1960s and 70s, vociferous demands for change, including for equality of educational opportunity, came from the liberal universities' own students, who frequently denounced them as centres of preservation of social privilege. Both of these sets of pressures were to become stronger as the twentieth century drew to a close, as older religious influences in education waned further, and as international bodies like the EU and OECD became more powerful.

Confinements New

Eloquent re-articulations of the liberal university ideal appeared during the twentieth century, including those by Karl Jaspers in Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War, by Jacques Barzun in America during the fifties and sixties, and by Michael Oakeshott in the United Kingdom during the sixties and seventies. Such re-articulations however did not address in any comprehensive way the tensions between liberal higher learning and the new demands for mass higher education or advanced training. The attempts of governments to respond to such emergent demands were essentially pragmatic. They sought assistance or direction mainly from international bodies like the OECD or the EU Commission, but remained largely oblivious of the scholarly literature of modern times on the nature and scope of university education. In recent decades this scholarly literature has itself grown more self-critical (for instance Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, 1987) and sometimes more disparaging (for instance Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*, 1996). Notwithstanding its critical insights, it is difficult to see much in this literature that is promising in a practical sense—i.e. that might mobilise energies to sustained constructive purpose.

By contrast, the official international discourse on higher learning has grown more vocal and self-confident. It has embraced and elaborated further the new conventional wisdom alluded to in the opening paragraph above. University administrations have largely acquiesced in this event, and have increasingly come to see themselves as the university 'sector', or the higher education 'sector', of something larger. This 'something larger' is not now the church, as it would have been in pre-modern times in Europe. Nor is it the official Party ideology, as it was in the Third Reich or in the former Eastern Block countries. Rather, it is that which, in contemporary democracies, has replaced older or more authoritarian orthodoxies: namely, the goals of national economic and social policy. That such economic and social policy might have many admirable features is not in question. Neither is it to be denied that universities have a crucial part to play in advancing a society's material welfare, both locally and more widely. What is deeply questionable however is the confidence with

which an entire family of assumptions has assigned to higher education a new definition of its own purposes. This is a definition which is rarely articulated in educational terms. If it were, it would have to speak in some detail about students, their needs, their emergent identities, and the goals worthy of their commitments as participants in higher learning. But the new official discourse on education betrays a neglect of this whole field; a neglect which is masked by the self-assurance of its own articulations. From an educational perspective however, this neglect has consequences which are scarcely less restrictive, though in more intricate ways, than the servilities of earlier ages.

A concrete example will help to illustrate the point at issue here. Nowhere is the confidence in question more pronounced, or more misplaced, than in dealing with 'quality' in education. Newly understood, 'quality' is now the most significant watchword where important policy decisions are to be made, in education as in other fields of action. But what the new understanding has most effectively accomplished is the recasting of questions of real quality in education as ones of indexed quantity. Performative comparisons are thus more easily concluded. As a consequence however, the field of education loses something decisive of its own integrity as it becomes pervaded by goals and forms of appraisal that are native to a different species of action; namely the goals and the performance criteria of industry and commerce. This recasting is a major development of recent decades, and it has become progressively more established. That is not to say that it is an intentionally mean-spirited development. Its acceptability is notably achieved by appeal to requirements of democratic accountability. But it is also achieved by the fact that it has not challenged the traditional values of liberal learning head-on. Rather its earnest preoccupation with quality-as-measurability has allowed goals that are intrinsically educational to become eclipsed, or to slip quietly out of the picture. In contemporary official literature and pronouncements, it is still the case that passing reference is made to the personal development of learners and to the cultural benefits of higher education. Very rarely however do these receive the detailed consideration and analysis that is given to the strategic economic and social policy goals which universities are called on to serve. Voices that are specifically educational speak momentarily, but are then effectively restored to silence.

As evidence of this event, witness the terms and concepts that are now the more prevalent ones in the discourse of educational debate and policy-making: 'knowledge economy', 'internal audit', 'value-added', 'upskilling', 'performance indicators', 'risk-assessment'. Witness also those that have fallen into relative disuse: 'liberal education', 'independence of mind', 'education of the whole person', 'discovery of identity', 'cultural enrichment', and so on. This contrast is revealing. The former group are mainly terms of denotation, making things more amenable to measurement, while the latter are mainly terms of connotation, carrying a suggestive range of meanings. The comparative imprecision of the latter terms moreover places them at a disadvantage wherever measures of pragmatic effectiveness have established an ascendancy over questions of intrinsic worth and justification. Increasingly, in contemporary cultures of educational administration and leadership, it is as if the connotative terms have become yesteryear's thoughts, their continued use calling attention to nothing so much as a kind of nostalgia on the part of the users.

This neglect of the specifically educational purposes of the university is evident however, not merely among administrators and policy-makers, many of whom voice their own complaints about the new utilitarianism that is imposed on their work. It is, if anything, more pronounced among some prominent critical writers on education, where it appears as a radical form of scepticism, or an effective silencing of voices that seek to assemble collective energies for constructive educational action. Such authors share a certain kind of postmodern disposition; one which is highly accomplished in undertaking critiques, but which also holds that the emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment are dead or discredited. On such accounts, attempts to reclaim something of enduring worth from the Enlightenment's inspirations are misconceived or doomed to failure. Perhaps the most striking example of this combination of critical incisiveness and determined scepticism is J. F. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979 French, 1984 English); a work that has influenced many other writings in this vein. We shall consider some of these 'postmodern' criticisms later, but here it is just necessary to stress that the new radical scepticism adds a further dimension (albeit for serious critical reasons) to the confinement of thought and action that we have been reviewing.

On our analysis so far then, one of the most serious challenges facing scholars in universities at present, and not only those working in the humanities and social sciences, is to recognise such confinement for what it is; to allow inspirations from the past to be heard anew and be given a generous yet critical hearing; to engage with those inspirations in such a way that they become active voices in an interplay that may have decisive consequences for the present and future: especially for learners, whether as undergraduates, as post-graduates, or as advanced researchers. The reference to learners here reminds us that this is an *educational* interplay, properly so called—one that must ever be freely renewed, that remains ongoing, and that has no fixed outcome. In addressing that challenge it is now appropriate, for at least three reasons, to call on the thinking of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1765-1835), briefly referred to above as the founder of the University of Berlin. Firstly, far from being an out-of-touch academic, Humboldt was for a period a politician. It was during his brief period as Prussian Minister for Education that the University of Berlin was founded. Secondly, Lyotard's summary criticisms of Humboldt's achievements and legacy in *The Postmodern Condition* are a good example of the effective silencing I mentioned earlier. By allowing Humboldt to speak for himself now, we will hopefully witness a kind of vision that, for all its biases of history and circumstance, is instructive in more ways than one for the educational policy discourse of our own day. The third reason is related to this second one and is clearly voiced by a prominent university leader, Gerhard Casper, President of Stanford University from 1992 to 2000. Casper speaks as follows about Humboldt's founding document for the University of Berlin, which we will then look at more closely in the next section.

It was only ten pages in length, and constitutes perhaps the most concise reflections ever written on the university as an institution. These reflections have in no way lost their relevance, despite changes in the notion of scholarship and in the problems universities have experienced over the last two centuries. ... Quite to the contrary, with universities seemingly hopelessly confused about their mission as they enter the twenty-first century, it is a matter of urgency to reflect on the university's core tasks and not be diverted

by those who want the university to be all things to all people. (Casper, 1998, p. 2)

Humboldt's Conception of the Liberal University

Humboldt was a leading humanities scholar in the period of the late Enlightenment, and a close associate of Schiller, Goethe, and other prominent German intellectuals. He became Minister for Education in Prussia during the troubled years 1809-10 and in this short time he radically reformed the Prussian system of schooling and established a new kind of university. Despite the fact that the new university in Berlin became an inspiration for liberal universities elsewhere, Humboldt's own educational thinking has rarely received in the English-speaking world the kind of attention that it merits. During his period as Minister he was frequently advised by Friedrich Schleiermacher, a liberal Protestant theologian, and Johann G. Fichte, an idealist philosopher with a strong devotion to German nationalism. Humboldt prepared a number of documents to guide educational reforms, few of which were published during his lifetime. The one that contains his most distinctive thoughts on the university carries the lengthy title 'On the Spirit and Organisational Framework of Higher Scholarly Institutions in Berlin' (henceforth referred to as Humboldt's Berlin Document). The radicalness of Humboldt's commitment to academic freedom *and* public service is evident in this document, a radicalness that is all the more striking because it is found in a Minister for Education:

The state should not look to the universities for anything that directly concerns its own interest. It should rather cherish a conviction that in fulfilling their real function, the universities will not only serve the state's purposes but serve them on an infinitely higher plane. On this higher plane, more is comprehended and forces and means (*Kräfte und Hebel*) are brought into action which are quite different from those that the state can command. § 20

This distinction between the 'real function' of a university and the interests of the state remains crucial for Humboldt. But his reasoning here also remains clearly out-of-season for the conventional wisdom that now seeks to make bedfellows of the university and the interests of state and industry. So let us look again at this reasoning. Humboldt's conviction is that the higher forms of understanding that are advanced when the university fulfils its real purpose contribute in turn to the realisation of the state's best purposes. And they do so more bountifully for being unforced. For Humboldt, such political purposes were those of promoting non-coercive forms of security that would best enable human originality and diversity to flourish. This argument, which must seem eccentric to all forms of utilitarian calculations, is properly intelligible only when one acknowledges its basis in Humboldt's sincere faith in what he regarded as the natural consequences, or unforced fruits, of higher learning. And this calls for a closer investigation of what he called the 'real function' of the universities. Two short comments in the second and third paragraphs of the Berlin Document reveal two central features of Humboldt's thinking on the universities:

Their essence consists in bringing about a combination of objective scholarly enquiry (*Wissenschaft*) and the education of the person (*Bildung*). (p. 243)

Since these institutions can only fulfil their purpose when each of them bears continuously in mind the pure idea of scholarly enquiry (*Wissenschaft*), their dominant principles must be solitude/sanctuary and freedom (*Einsamkeit und Freiheit*). (p. 243)

The terms *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung* are difficult to translate into English without some loss of meaning. While 'science' is the term normally used for *Wissenschaft*, the German term also covers scholarship in fields other than the natural sciences—for instance the social sciences and humanities. Humboldt is keen to point out moreover that *Wissenschaft* should be understood as something more dynamic than a body of specialist and established expertise to be transferred to the next generation. He sees it as a distinguishing mark of universities that 'they conceive of *Wissenschaft* as dealing with ultimately inexhaustible tasks: this means that they are engaged in an unceasing activity of enquiry' (p. 243). The word *Bildung* is even more difficult to translate than *Wissenschaft*. We shall explore its distinctive resonances later, but for the moment let us describe it as the kind of learning that engages the learner's mind and heart; that enriches and sustains the learner's personal culture.

This brief exploration of key features of Humboldt's philosophy of higher learning brings together a set of principles with which almost everyone who works in a university as a scholar would agree. These principles achieved public recognition in northern Europe in the early nineteenth century, firstly as the founding principles of the University of Berlin, and later as the principles for the founding or reform of universities in many parts of the world. Yet principles such as these rarely find prominent articulation today. As we observed earlier, a more mercenary discourse has become at home in educational policy debates and in the management of educational practice itself. This reluctance in our own day to give regular re-affirmation to such principles—and this applies to those of a J. H. Newman as well as those of a Humboldt—also has something to do with a perception that the thinking of such luminaries was in some respect a prisoner of their times, or more precisely, a prisoner of philosophical ideas that no longer receive widespread credibility today. In some respects this is true. For instance, the co-ordinating role in university studies given by Newman to theology as the 'queen of sciences' is widely seen as something belonging to a past era, even in today's Catholic universities. This should not mean however that we discard *The Idea of a University* or other such classics as possible sources of insight and inspiration.

In the case of Humboldt, his apparent attachment to a German idealist philosophy has led influential contemporary figures like Lyotard to consign his educational philosophy—and not just the metaphysical elements of it—to a dead and distant past. Lyotard criticises what he calls the '*Bildung*-effect' of Humboldt's scheme: that the university should orient its educational action to the 'spiritual and moral training of the nation' (*The Postmodern Condition*, p. 32). Lyotard sees something 'totalizing' in this; or to speak more plainly, he discerns in it some incipient totalitarianism. It is true that there are perceptible marks of Fichte's influence in the Berlin Document, firstly Fichte's idealist metaphysics and secondly his nationalistic outlook. It is likely however that these are more significant as concessionary references than as something more central to Humboldt's own outlook, as philosophical absolutism of any kind is foreign to Humboldt's outlook. Whatever nationalism was associated with Humboldt's educational ideas had more to do with an assertion of Prussian pride in

the face of humiliating defeat by Napoleon's army than with any more sinister forms of German nationalism, such as that which prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century. Humboldt was keen that the new university in Berlin would be organised on a very different basis to the recent reform of French education which brought the universities there under the centralised control of the Bonapartist state. Equally important, as I hope to point out in the next section of this essay, is that Humboldt's best educational ideas recommend themselves on their own merits, without recourse to any idealist metaphysics, just as many of Newman's do without recourse to theology as a 'supreme science'. It is precisely this point that many 'postmodern' critics are ill-disposed to grant. And in this respect 'postmodern' critiques of authoritarian thought can themselves become intolerant. They characteristically regard currents of thinking that have metaphysical elements as 'metanarratives' and then tend to adopt an intellectual stance of 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (*The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv). Where this incredulity becomes a prevalent feature of intellectual sensibility, as it has in many Western countries at present, it tends to dispossess voices from the past of any import or cogency they might have for our own thinking and doing. This contributes to a moral inarticulacy, or at least hesitancy, in public intellectual life, and it is in such a context that the new kind of utilitarianism described at the outset makes populist advances and secures its own place in the sun.

Educational Purpose in Higher Learning

Humboldt's thinking is untimely in two important respects, neither of them negative. Firstly it is well ahead of his own time, as can be seen from its major influence on higher learning in Germany and farther afield. Secondly, though not a prescription for our times, there are many features of this thinking that are particularly promising for what the liberal university might mean for us, two centuries later. In selecting from these many features just three themes for consideration, I would hope that this final section of the essay can contribute something constructive in place of the inarticulacy I have referred to in the previous paragraph. The first of these themes concerns Humboldt's insights on the nature and importance of advanced research, and why this should be concentrated in the university. The second theme concerns his arguments on teaching and on higher learning as an unfinished personal journey. The third theme concerns his reflections on the relationships between the university and outside interests and on the necessity to establish and maintain that relationship properly. We will take each of the three in turn, and comment in doing so on how Humboldt's ideas hold particular promise for the essential work of universities at present.

(a) Advanced Research

For Humboldt, as we have noted earlier, it was critical that the university must conspicuously keep in mind a pure idea of scholarly enquiry (*der reinen Idee der Wissenschaft*). Such enquiry, as we have noted, 'does not consist of closed bodies of permanently settled truths' (p. 244). Nor does research consist in adding newly-proven theories to an already accumulated stock of knowledge. Rather the universities must conceive of advanced research as 'dealing with ultimately inexhaustible tasks' (p. 243). Humboldt stresses that this is an unceasing process of disciplined enquiry, free from distraction and outside interference, engaged in by the most able minds. But he adds a further requirement, namely a commitment to collaborative effort:

the successful intellectual achievements of one person arouse the intellectual passions and enthusiasms of others ... and what was at first expressed by only

one individual becomes a common intellectual possession ... Given this collective character of individual accomplishment, the inner life of these higher intellectual institutions must be such as to call forth and sustain a continually self-renewing, wholly uncoerced and disinterested collaboration. (p. 243)

It is true to say that much evidence of these high ideals of advanced research can be found in universities throughout the world today. It is also true to say, however, that the continuing cultivation of such ideals is endangered by policies which now give to competition the prominence Humboldt gave to collaboration. Today's information technology makes possible a degree of productive collaboration between scholars across the world that Humboldt couldn't have imagined. At the same time, the official promotion of an ethos of competitiveness and commercialisation in universities now discourages precisely what he regarded as most essential. Humboldt's awareness of the adventitious forces of his own day serves to underline the importance he gave to academic freedom and protection from intrusion (*Freiheit* and *Einsamkeit*) in the pursuit of research. Our awareness of the adventitious forces of our day should highlight their particular relevance for us now.

If freedom from distraction was one reason why Humboldt located advanced research in the university, another reason was that he gave first importance to connecting both the conduct and the fruits of this research with teaching. This could not happen in academies that were devoted to research only, and in this Humboldt saw a particular loss both to researchers themselves and to students. His Berlin Document envisages both kinds of institutions for higher learning, and while he sees the research academy as the 'highest and ultimate sanctuary of scholarly research' (*die höchste und letzte Freistätte der Wissenschaft*) he is clearly opposed to removing the conduct of advanced research from the university. His reasons here spring from his dynamic view of teaching and learning, and this brings us to the second of the three themes.

(b) Research and Teaching as a Form of Learning

Far from divorcing research from teaching, Humboldt sees them as different but related aspects of an enduring commitment to learning. His reflections here provide a fund of insights on what quality in higher learning means in practice. They make a refreshing contrast to the largely vacant discourse on quality that is now current and that was criticised earlier. They highlight what is most distinctive and most worthy about higher education as a human undertaking by bringing together two purposes that are all too frequently separated, namely self-development and scholarly enquiry (*Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*). Some elaboration is called for here to understand this distinctiveness in its proper light.

When we think of students as coming to participate progressively in an unceasing enquiry through formative experiences of learning, then we are close to understanding what Humboldt means by *Bildung*. Far from being merely a transmission of skills or a cultivation of competencies, *Bildung* in any field of study suggests a continuing active interplay between a learner and an inheritance of learning. This interplay engages sensibility as well as imagination, bringing about incremental developments, and sometimes significant shifts, in the self-understanding of the learner. It constitutes the integrity of teaching and learning in the university and brings into action precisely

those 'forces and means (*Kräfte und Hebel*) ... which are quite different from those that the state can command'. Humboldt himself characterises *Bildung* as follows:

But if in our language we say *Bildung* (rather than *Kultur*), we mean something both higher and more inward, namely the attitude of mind which, from the knowledge and feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavour, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character. (*Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. VIII, 1, p. 30)

These reflections give us a fuller appreciation of what Humboldt means by the 'combination of objective scholarly enquiry and the education of the person'. They also illustrate that it is a commitment to research as an open-ended, unfinished task that underlines the necessity for *Freiheit* (academic freedom) and *Einsamkeit* (sanctuary/absence of intrusion). This commitment defines the university scholar not just as researcher, but also as a teacher. In journeying anew with a group of students on pathways with which the teacher is already familiar in greater or lesser degree, Humboldt argues that 'the teacher and student have their justification in the common pursuit of knowledge' (p. 243). The student finds a new engagement of personal identity in becoming a member of a community of learners in a particular field of study. In coming to experience imaginative neighbourhoods that were previously unknown, the student discovers something of the scientist in herself, or of the mathematician, or the historian, or the linguist. In such communities students, both individually and collectively, come to appreciate more explicitly the tenor of their own particular promise and limitations. The example set by the teacher is crucial here. It is most fruitful when the students come to see that here is a person who has accepted the responsibilities of learning as a lifelong personal responsibility, and who has undertaken to share the best fruits of her own learning in an inviting and self-critical spirit. Contributions from lively, enquiring minds are thus best cultivated, and the teacher finds new occasion to experience the joys, and sometimes the embarrassments, of learning from the students. The practical import of this point for today's communities of scholars is well summed-up by Gerhard Casper: 'university research benefits from teaching, not just teaching graduate students but also from teaching first-year students' (Casper, 1998, p. 3).

The integrity of this undertaking is compromised however, with unfortunate consequences for the quality of learning, if learning itself is dominated by extrinsic concerns such as a pursuit of grades and prizes, or if teaching itself becomes a technology. In the mass universities of today, both of these trends are conspicuously in evidence. Both trends are aggravated moreover where quality is primarily linked to performances that can be summarily indexed. This is not to suggest that commitments to learning that spring from extrinsic reasons can easily be replaced by something more wholesome. Even the best human actions sometimes answer to a mixture of motives. It is to argue however for the importance of balance; a balance that cannot properly come into view if quality in learning is misconceived from the start. Neither is there any suggestion here that electronic advances such as virtual learning environments automatically undermine the purposes of university teaching. That they *could* undermine these purposes should go without saying. But just this point needs to be emphasised, as does the point that the best educational uses of the electronic media need more discerning attention from educational authorities and more ingenuity of effort from teachers. The fact that in some courses today, all of the teaching is done

on-line, should serve as a warning that in these instances something essential has already been lost.

(c) The University and Outside Interests

On this, our third and final theme, Humboldt's arguments are at their most vigorous. The uncompromising boldness of his declaration that the state should not look to the university for anything that directly concerns its own interests illustrates this. No less emphatic are his requirements for academic freedom and absence from intrusion. Far from arguing for an ivory tower aloofness for the university however, Humboldt keenly appreciates that 'the university always stands in a close relationship to practical life and the state, since it is always concerned with the practical affair of training (*Leitung*) the younger generation' (p. 248). The crucial question here is the freedom of the university to undertake its various activities—research, teaching and professional preparation—in accordance with its own clear understanding of the integrity of its commitments. To put it in today's terms, this is the freedom of the university to set its own agenda, as distinct from having that agenda, or significant parts of it, set by others.

There is a further perceptiveness in Humboldt's reflections however, and this helps to explain the peculiar resoluteness of his stance. This is a perceptiveness of a tendency by the university itself, or more specifically by some of its members, to fall prey to emergent expediencies and pragmatisms. He warns that as well as being threatened by the state, academic freedom can be threatened 'also by the intellectual institutions themselves which tend to develop, at their birth, a certain outlook which will therefore readily resist the emergence of another outlook' (p. 246). Despite the guarded wording of his remarks, this sentence reveals Humboldt's concern that scholars who should cherish the particular responsibilities of their calling can fall victim to beliefs and doctrines that compromise that calling. And here he declares boldly that 'the state must seek to avert the harm which can possibly arise from this source' (p. 246). Nowadays the state might accomplish this by enshrining academic freedom in legislation (as was done in the Universities Act of 1997 in Ireland). But Humboldt envisages the state as having a continuing proactive role here as guarantor, and he reserves to it the exclusive right to appoint university teachers (p. 249). One could argue that with this move Humboldt undermined his entire project, and that, in the absence of a statutory instrument, such a role should be reserved to the governing authorities of the university. Such were Humboldt's apprehensions about the politics of university governance however that he placed the important role of guarantor of academic freedom in the hands of an enlightened state. It is difficult to see what state would discharge such a role with honour, except perhaps the kind that would have a Wilhelm von Humboldt as Minister for Education.

In any case, the interferences which Humboldt feared spring not only from the state. Nowadays they spring also from commercial interests, and in a particular way from the commercialisation of research. That such commercialisation can work to stimulate productive research that might not otherwise be undertaken is not in question. That it discourages research efforts from other paths and that it sometimes interferes with the proper conduct of research are facts of life that have increased in significance in recent decades. Measures such as ethical agreements are now frequently employed by universities in their dealings with the corporate funders of research. Whatever the merits of such agreements, they provide only a partial remedy for a malady that has

deeper roots, namely in the essence of commercialisation itself, and in its progressive acceptance as a normal feature of higher learning. A proper acknowledgement of this malady, and of its consequences, requires a richer kind of thought and analysis than that which currently prevails in the public discourse on higher education. It calls for the kind of perceptiveness that Humboldt brought to bear in his Berlin Document and other writings. This is borne out by statements from two former Presidents of leading American universities that I would like to quote before concluding. The first of these is from Gerhard Casper, former President of Stanford, whom I have quoted already and who acknowledges his own indebtedness to Humboldt.

If a research-intensive university becomes dependent on the imperatives of business production or government industrial policy, it loses the advantage that it gains from its commitment to the endless process of enquiry, the search to know. ... Basic research is a public good that business, given its orientation towards profit, can produce only in a limited quantity on its own. This is an insight that governments tend to forget all too frequently, especially in times of fiscal crisis. Stanford would not be where it is today but for government funding in the period since World War II. (p. 5)

The second statement is by Derek Bok, former President of Harvard, in his book *Universities in the Marketplace* (2003). Referring to a widespread uneasiness felt by academics who are neither champions of entrepreneurial research nor 'professors on the left', Bok writes as follows:

But many are afraid that commercially oriented activities will come to overshadow other intellectual values and that university programs will be judged primarily by the money they bring in and not by their intrinsic intellectual quality. ... However hard it is to explain these fears, they persist as a mute reminder that something of irreplaceable value may get lost in the relentless growth of commercialization. (pp. 16-17)

Reminders of this kind should not be mute. For the reasons we have considered in this essay, it is crucial that such reminders are now incisively voiced and clearly heard. In this, I believe that untimely thoughts like Humboldt's are singularly promising.

Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1959).

Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialisation of Higher Education*. (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

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