

Ethics, Epistemology and the Post-Humboldtian University



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The University Ruined or Rebuilt?

The perception that the ‘Humboldtian’ academy, and the distinctive ‘Berlin curriculum’ with which it was powerfully associated, is coming to an end is increasingly prominent in contemporary higher educational literature (Kwiek 2009; Zoontjens 2010; Boulton and Lucas 2011; Nybom 2012). Philosophers of education and strategic planners in international higher education generally have for some considerable time grown accustomed to a vigorous critique of the institutions and political programmes that they serve levelled by—especially—the critical pedagogy movement. This critique typically targets the alleged complicity of universities and their various sponsors with the ‘neoliberal’ forces of global capital (Brown 2015; Khoo et al. 2016). It also attacks trenchantly the resultant ‘colonisation’ of contemporary higher education by powers inimical to the Enlightenment Humboldtian values and structures of Berlin 1810, through which Europe’s tradition of medieval university learning survived the crisis of industrialisation and refurbished itself successfully for the distinctive intellectual and moral tasks of modernity (Chibber 2013). Originally a bastion and custodian of Enlightenment principles of rationality and emancipation, the Humboldtian higher education systems of particularly Europe and North America have become in the postwar period, according to the terms of this bracing assessment, little more than technocratic training laboratories in thrall to the administrative-bureaucratic state and its obeisance before the pervasive and dehumanizing forces of international capitalism—abetting their relentless search for docile labour, boundless consumption and maximum profit (Trifonas and Peters 2005; Brady 2012; Cruickshank 2016; Fulford 2016).

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Despite the obvious astringency of its rhetoric, critical pedagogy and its affiliates in other areas of critical theory are not in general fatalistic before this challenging vista of conflicted educational purpose. Indeed, perhaps beginning with the celebrated work of the late Bill Readings (1996) in the mid 1990s, much of the adversarial energy of 'theory' in the last two decades has been concerned with the rescue of higher education from its perceived performative malaise. The prospectus for renewal has taken two principal forms, each of which has accrued much polemical energy from the shifts, turns, crescendos and crashes of late techno-capitalism in the last 25 years.

The first expression of hope for the post-Humboldtian university has harnessed its expectations increasingly confidently to the technological innovations currently overtaking learning at all levels and across all sectors of education. It welcomes the coming of Web 2.0, the advent of digital and handheld technologies, and the rise of autonomous social media and virtual interactivity representative of the leading edge of far-reaching educational experiment (Marshall 2010). Invigorated recently through the stimulus provided by the large-scale and highly ambitious rebuild of the university estate in many developed and developing economies, the proponents of this particular remedy for the contemporary university's problems look to the emerging opportunity of major campus infrastructure redevelopment for a radical reimagining of the organisation and heuristics of the Humboldtian academy (Lepori and Kyvik 2010; Marcus 2016). If their predictions are correct, this will be one in which many of the established patterns of university governance and authority, learning and teaching, assessment and award, will be swept away wholesale by a technologically-enhanced democratisation of study and an empowerment of learners no longer passively disposed before the traditions and hierarchies of university custom (Kirkwood and Price 2014). Epitomised by the supposed obsolescence of 'the lecture' as the emblematic expression of traditional university pedagogy, this revolution will install a replenished culture of maieutic discovery at the heart of university experience and its rebuilt plant and environment. Here transmission will be replaced with enquiry, initiation with contestation, and monologic reverence for the faculties of disinterested reason with emotionally literate and culturally situated engagement, creativity and dialogue (Arvanitakis 2013; Gibbs 2013; Oleson 2014).

The second line of critique is the chief concern of this essay, because it ventures to the heart of the underlying concept of the 'Humboldtian' university, the accompanying 'Berlin curriculum' and its offshoots, as well as the politics and philosophy of twenty-first-century higher education knowledge production on the global stage. The distinctive character of this specific appraisal of the condition of higher education is its unsparing rejection of much that passes for the ordinary Humboldtian settlement and its influential legacy. Its interrogation extends to university structure, the organisation and transmission of curricular knowledge, the construction of the learner as an historically situated subject, and the implicit, foundational authority of the Enlightenment principles underpinning the orthodox Humboldtian understanding of the university as an institutional locus of research and teaching (Shahjahan and Morgan 2016). It aspires to question all of these principles and assumptions, suggesting daringly that the volatile cultural politics of globalisation now impacting

so tempestuously on international higher education is a welcome occasion to problematize the conventional conception of the university, not only in the name of the excluded groups it reportedly does not serve, but in relation to still deeper epistemological and ethical premises of the university as a defining Enlightenment idea itself (Rata 2012; McDonald 2013)

This specific style of critique is here identified with the controversial championing of ‘indigenous epistemologies’ in the philosophy and practice of education. The reason for this is that indigenous epistemology—or indigenous knowledge—movement is in its radicalism and audacity revealingly representative of the attempt to derive a fully alternative educational paradigm from the current turbulence of globalisation. Establishing to its own satisfaction the credibility and appeal of its new paradigm, it then seeks deliberately to question the overarching conception of the Humboldtian university within it as a favoured model for future patterns and provision of higher education. While in academic parlance the notion of ‘indigenous epistemologies’ has local frames of application and spans a huge range of cultural and intellectual endeavour, the strategic application of its claims to the ‘defamiliarisation’ of the university as a site of advanced research and as a community of study has potentially important consequences, stretching well beyond the frequently specific and highly differentiated goals of indigenous epistemology as a disciplinary method in action.

Indigenous Epistemologies

As a defence of a wholly naturalized epistemology, the indigenous epistemology movement, or movements, appraises *all* human epistemological activity as fully natural phenomena to be described, understood, and evaluated from an entirely anthropological and fully *a posteriori* perspective (Ghosh 2010). It therefore both addresses and reframes the complete spectrum of human epistemological activities, ranging from those of vernacular folk and cognitive specialists such as shamans and priests to those of professional philosophical epistemologists, psychologists and laboratory scientists. Indigenous epistemology embraces both local and international epistemological practices, and accordingly at its purest regards so-called ‘Western’ epistemological preferences as simply one set among a range of diverse, contingent epistemological options advanced by, and hence available to, multiple human agents and communities. In this respect it aims to decentre and ‘provincialize’ the definitions, objectives, assumptions, approaches, criteria and conclusions of—most especially—the Western scientific worldview (Hall 2001). It almost always pursues this paramount objective in explicitly *ethical* terms, as part of a larger process of social and economic struggle against what it construes as colonial intellectual domination and abjection (Nylander et al. 2013).

Politically speaking, indigenous epistemology strongly rebukes what it unmasks as the double standard embraced by most Western epistemology, exempting itself from the same kind of anthropological scrutiny to which the epistemologies of

non-Western or pre-Enlightenment cultures are typically subject at the hands of Western ethnographers. It also therefore repudiates the alleged condescension involved in classic characterizations of the epistemological activities of so-called ‘non-Western’ actors as simple *ethnoepistemologies*, interdependent with the contrasting valorization of the epistemological activities of Western thinkers as a kind of benchmarked ‘epistemology proper’ dissociated from any local origins or investments. Champions of indigenous epistemology argue that there is an implicit, unexamined dualism commonly expressed in the presumption that thinkers in ‘other’ cultures practice mere ‘*ethnoepistemology*’ or ‘*ethnophilosophy*’. This prejudice then curates and marginalises alternative worldviews as mere anthropological curiosities, deeming their holders unqualified to participate in the West’s ‘genuinely’ philosophical conversation until they become initiated into the mainstream educational practices and authorized styles of rationality most prized by the West—at the institutional apogee of which sits the Humboldtian university and its preferred, executive methods of research and teaching (Scharfstein 2001).

In addition to this, the established scholarly use of the terms ‘ethnophilosophy’ and ‘ethnoepistemology’ by Western philosophers is unacceptable to the indigenous epistemology movement precisely because it reproduces the conceit that Western philosophy is the normative standard by which all other philosophies and all other contemplative activities of the world’s cultures are to be tested and calibrated—leaving Western philosophy *as the only legitimate practice of reason*, rather than as one among many contending and complementary, iterative ethnophilosophical disciplinary paradigms (de Sousa Santos 2015). The more broadly inclusive and centrifugal use of the term ‘indigenous epistemology’ circumvents this trap, its advocates insist, because it embraces appreciatively (if of course sometimes critically) *every* epistemological activity, be it African, East Asian, European, Circumpolar, Native American, or even pre-Enlightenment. *All* epistemological activities, past and present, can then be understood as instances of indigenous epistemology in this broad categorical sense; and all indigenous epistemologies are legitimate, worthwhile expressions of epistemology in action. From this position of mutual respect, recognition of indigenous epistemology also further supports critical reflection upon the nature, methods, aims, domains and accepted definitions of generic epistemology itself from a broadly anthropological, fully *a posteriori* stance (Phipps 2013).

When actualised in recent discussions of the future of universities across the global landscape of higher education, indigenous epistemology focuses on a range of concerns in teaching and research, linked mostly to questions of authority, admissibility, curriculum, impact, ownership, experience and participation. For the limited purposes of this essay, two of these areas where indigenous epistemology currently seems particularly active will be reviewed: two areas where its proponents claim to have made significant inroads into the shaping of the twenty-first century university thinking. They are:

The critique of the founding ‘Humboldtian moment’ in the history of European higher education and its collusion with the imperial project

The rejection of the orthodox Western or ‘Berlin’ curriculum in the name of a new ‘epistemological ethic’ ontologically attuned to the global environmental and other ‘crises of sustainability’ confronting education and society at the present time

In each of the two domains, it is possible to take perfectly seriously the urgency and relevance of the questions being raised, but still point to some significant shortcomings in the arguments advanced. It is also possible to reconsider some of the ways in which a Humboldtian or neo-Humboldtian conception of the university might survive the accompanying sceptical scrutiny of indigenous epistemology and indeed respond persuasively to the issues with which the advocates of indigenous epistemology are justifiably preoccupied (Martín-Díaz 2017).

Authority and Subversion in the Humboldtian Moment

Directed at the founding phase of the Humboldtian reform of the European (and by later extension North American) university, the defenders of indigenous epistemology habitually critique the Humboldtian reification of structures of educational thought and practice which they allege privilege and entrench dominant and exclusionary forms of Enlightenment rationality. Hence Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1809/1990) conception of the ‘unity’ of teaching and research (*Einheit von Lehre und Forschung*) may appear to enshrine a commitment to a collaborative undertaking in which ‘the professors are not there for the students, but rather both are there for science (and scholarship)’ (Ash 2006). Its enforced ‘unity’ is, however, already dependent upon privileged versions of rational enquiry and authorized styles of deliberation intrinsically hostile to everything that Enlightenment ideas of educational advancement have pushed into a rejected and repressed obscurantist past or an alien cultural and ethnic pre-rational periphery. The unitary and universalizing trends in Enlightenment constructions of approved knowledge inscribed in the appositely-named ‘university’ of the Humboldtian imaginary can then be seen as less inclined towards a comprehensive and pluralist approach to all human learning, and more obviously supportive of hegemonic versions of knowledge-production tacitly applied to the maintenance of power by the ‘knowledgeable’ over the seemingly ‘ignorant’. Nan Seuffert (1997) has elaborated a critique of this ‘traditional Eurocentric epistemology’ which has ‘claimed universal applicability across disciplines, cultures and historical periods’ (104) through a process of colonial imposition, or what she has termed (echoing Spivak and Said of course) ‘epistemic violence’ (105).

More extensively, the historian Anne McClintock (1995) has related the same critical paradox to the violent contradictions of European imperialism, reaching one of its several moments of crisis just as the post-Napoleonic Humboldtian reforms were taking root—and as the fragile Westphalian models of national identity and belonging faltered in the face of renewed encounter with the colonial Other. In

particular, McClintock highlights a tacit imperial geography of the educated Western mind and its supporting educational institutions which from the late eighteenth century onwards has conflated temporality with global space. Western civilization in this imperial economy is poised at the pinnacle of cultural development, situating other cultures at lower levels of attainment. In a parallel metaphor, time becomes a linear track moving from 'underdeveloped' peoples towards higher 'civilization' and its myriad seemingly monumental achievements in the march of human progress. McClintock cautions that such a temporal construct authorises strategic modes for the internal regulation of education, at all levels, whilst simultaneously structuring, differentiating and subordinating external ethnic and national groups subject to the infantilizing colonial gaze: 'Imperial progress across the space of empire is figured as a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory. Geographical difference across space is figured as historical difference across time' (40).

The logic of this view strengthens imperial and post-imperial attitudes to perceived economic and social progress, which are then concentrated on a white, Euroethnic normative centre and which serve to exonerate prolonged commercial, cultural and even military exploitation of the 'developing' world by the 'post-historical' Western powers. Knowledge in its diverse forms is in this worldview forever classified as a cultural universal, occupying a nonraced and depoliticised space within the diverse ecology of human behaviour and camouflaged as the innocent accompaniment to a progressive Enlightenment humanism ineluctably bound to the paternalist dissemination of 'emancipatory' Western liberal values and economic 'development'. One of the central responses of an indigenous epistemology genuinely attuned to the oppositional potential of its cultural witness is to expose, Tamson Pietsch (2015) has recently suggested, the supremacist assumptions supporting this pervasive prejudice, contesting an account of universalizable knowledge which inflicts epistemic damage on both subaltern, excluded populations *and* on the central idea of the university itself. Such a comprehensive rethink of the purposes of university learning becomes by this light not simply a protest, but an interpellation in the passive performativity of educational competence, subverting the university's metaphors of reception and transmission and reaffirming the agency of multiple indigenous agents involved in the creation and circulation of new and multiple forms of knowledge.

There is much in this potent line of argument with which it is difficult to disagree. The collusion of the early modern institutions of Western education with the scientific racism, possessive individualism, instrumental rationality and the deprecations of imperialism is indisputable and well documented. The convergence of the Humboldtian reforms with the last days of Bonaparte's Europe and the imperial redistributions of the Congress of Vienna, lent much new vitality to the European university system and provided an obvious overseas context for the representative taxonomies and axiologies of Enlightenment collecting, classification and appropriation. Nevertheless, it seems unfair to the principles of the Humboldtian reforms to interpret them as exclusively captive in their totality to the advances of the imperial mentality (Worrall 2015).

As Andrea Wulf has very recently pointed out in her *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (2015), the Grand Tour of the Americas upon which Alexander von Humboldt embarked in 1800, and which he convinced his older brother Wilhelm could be a viable alternative form of tertiary education reproaching the ossified learning of the ancient universities, was itself an 'indigenizing' undertaking. Far from simply imposing prior categories of knowledge collection and categorisation upon the subject Hispanic terrains of Latin America, Humboldt grew increasingly dissatisfied with the armchair theorizing and received opinion of the educational methods in which he had been trained at Frankfurt and Göttingen. Inspired by a new spirit of inquiry sensitized to local knowledge and cultural wisdom, Humboldt developed entirely novel schemes for recording and explaining the exotic 'unregulated' natural and human histories he encountered on his travels. Indeed, the most serious criticism levelled at him when he returned to Prussia was essentially that he had 'gone native' in his credulous acceptance of indigenous knowledge, concocting fantastical explanatory schemes (eg on 'animal electricity') to reconcile tribal and creole wisdom with European scientific theory. In this regard, Alexander von Humboldt merits the same kind of rehabilitation extended to other enlightened imperial travellers and researchers, such as William Jones, by the likes of Robert Irwin (2006), Ibn Warraq (2007) and Michael Franklin (2011), who see these figures unjustly traduced by the clumsy pressing against them of the catch-all charge of 'Orientalism'. Like Jones in India, Alexander von Humboldt acquired deep respect for the cultures he encountered in South America, seeing in their rich traditions the limitations of Enlightenment rationality and fretful of its ominous, too-easy annexation by the predatory forces of imperial and commercial occupation acted out in the plight of the people among whom he was living and working (Marcone 2013).

Although we would of course be unlikely then to find in the 1810 Humboldtian vision of the reformed European university an educational institution free of imperial taint, or exempt from the gross internal inequalities of its own society (still less its colonial possessions), we do well to read the evidence with some subtlety of mind. Indigenous epistemological criticisms of the immense influence of the 'new' university of Berlin and its several imitators, point particularly accusingly to its elevation of the primacy of 'pure' science (*Bildung durch Wissenschaft*) over hands-on specialised professional training and craft-skill fieldwork (*Ausbildung, Spezialschulmodell*). For some, this is the germ of a development destined to culminate over the course of the next century in the rise of the German academic technocracy: the pure 'We Scholars' attacked by Nietzsche in his 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil* and foreshadowing the corrupted elites responsible for bringing German universities to their darkest nihilistic moment of complicity with state terror. In the 1920s, Berlin University was to host the extremist 'Race Pope', Hans Günther, a eugenicist appointed 'Professor for Racial Science, Racial Biology and Regional Sociology' (Hauschild 1997). Bill Readings' figuration of 'ruins', we do well to remember, was to be grimly and materially realized in the fate of the city Berlin from 1943–1945, uncannily presaged in the melancholy interest of the Third Reich

in the so-called ‘ruin value’ of the overpowering yet strangely despairing monumental buildings with which it refashioned the German capital (Kitchen 2015).

It nevertheless seems clear that from the outset of their schemes—and largely because of the profound educational impact of the Grand Tour rite of passage—the Humboldt brothers sought to understand the conduct of science and scholarship within the reformed university precisely as an open-ended processes of inquiry—‘not a finished thing to be found, but something unfinished and perpetually sought after’, as Wilhelm described it (Ash 2006, 246). Study at a ‘modern’ university competing with the hands-on allure of the Grand Tour and its peripatetic learning was therefore for the Humboldts not to be based upon the rediscovery and repetition of things learned in textbooks, but on an approach to pedagogy, and an attitude to skill and to thinking, infinitely broader than—if of course critically inclusive of—the acquisition of specialised knowledge.

The Berlin Curriculum: Ethics and Ontology

Modern suspicion of the so-called ‘Berlin Curriculum’ and its various post-1810 mutations is commensurate with the wider epistemological anxieties discussed above. In dedicating their reformed university in Berlin to the canons of secular, Enlightened rationality, the Humboldts and their allies endeavoured to refit an older classical curriculum inherited in the first instance from the medieval and Renaissance humanists yet in key respects broken apart by the destructive convulsions of the European Reformation and the Thirty Years War. Europe’s uncertain heritage of shrunken, depleted seats of learning already faced by the middle of eighteenth Century a host of civic and confessional rivals offering advanced education to minorities excluded by faith, class, language or regional isolation from the major centres of higher learning (Israel 2002). According to those of their critics fueled in today’s climate of controversy by the concerns of indigenous or marginalized epistemologies, Wilhelm von Humboldt redeemed the disintegrating university system, however, by creating a rigid, competitive academic architecture designed to modernize and standardise the idea of the research university and establish its unswerving institutional sovereignty over the production and adjudication of almost all forms human knowledge capital and investigation. For this formidable task, he drew heavily upon Kant’s anticlerical disciplinary blueprint from the 1798, *Dispute of the Faculties*, as well as on his 1803 *On Education*. He also relied heavily upon J. G. Fichte’s representation of the ‘subjects of the higher studies’ from his 1807 *Deduced Scheme for an Academy to be Established in Berlin* and his 1808 nationalistic clarion-call, *Addresses to the German Nation*.

For the Kant of *On Education* (1803/2003), university education was intended to accomplish four things (4): first, it must make human beings capable of exerting discipline over their ‘animal nature.’ Next, it must supply ‘culture’, immersion in which makes students aware of their own abilities and proclivities within a ‘tradition’ of thought and learning. Thirdly, it must cultivate refinement and discretion of man-

ners so that students are able to conduct themselves appropriately in society. And finally, university education must provide ‘moral training’ so that students will learn to choose nothing but good ends—‘good ends being those which are necessarily approved by everyone, and which may at the same time be the aim of everyone’ (20).

In Fichte’s *Deduced Scheme* (1805–1806/1926), ‘*all scientific material must be comprehended in its organic unity and interpreted in the philosophical spirit...as the pure form of knowledge*’ (258). The experience of this unity is to be reached, for Fichte, solely within the confines of the (proposed) university, because only the accumulated pedagogical expertise of the university can supply the proper organization of scientific and philosophical concepts, the correct order in which they should appear, and an understanding of their place in the whole. To realise this ideal, Fichte went still further in proposing that a ‘philosophical encyclopedia’ be created to structure the curriculum and orient teachers and students towards the Kantian branches of knowledge. Individual subjects were to be treated in accordance with the rational principles of the proposed encyclopedia and all staff were to be required to comprehend and ratify the nature of the overall curriculum by virtue of their own training in philosophy. The encyclopedia, Fichte argued, ‘*must gradually grow of itself by the interaction of philosophy and the philosophically correct treatment of the particular subjects of science*’ (194–195). Individual sciences must be guided by a more comprehensive conception of knowledge than that contained in the various sciences themselves—and for Fichte Philosophy is the discipline destined to afford that broader context of understanding and learning within which the separate branches of knowledge can together flourish: ‘*The spirit of every particular science is a limited spirit*’, he notes. The ‘spirit’ of philosophy, by contrast, understands ‘*first itself and then in itself all other spirits...the artist in a particular science must be above all a philosophical artist, and his particular art is merely a further determination and special application of his general philosophical art*’ (192–193).

Although Humboldt ultimately rejected Fichte’s encyclopedia proposal for his new university, his brilliance was to synthesize Fichte’s unified, interdisciplinary curricular concept with Kant’s advocacy of a separate ‘Philosophical Faculty’ for the attainment of educational goals ‘*that concerns itself with the interests of the sciences, that is, with truth: one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly. For without a faculty of this kind, the truth would not come to light*’ (1798/1979, 22). From this combination, the distinctive ‘Berlin Curriculum’ was formed, enlivening Humboldt’s conception of a coherent knowledge-rich *Bildung* in which a perfect resonance might be achieved between the formation of the individual person, the legitimate interests of society and the advance of human civilization from familiar to unfamiliar domains of discovery (Nybohm 2007).

In several obvious respects, the imagery of the Humboldtian curriculum does appear to confirm the worst fears of those thinkers and popular pedagogues wary that from its inception the reborn, research-intensive facultised university of the modern era has been predicated upon an exclusionary and totalizing understanding of knowledge inseparable from the institutional power and social cachet of the university itself. Intolerant of difference, hierarchical in governance, elitist in its self-replication, this model of the university and the learning that goes on inside it

not only represses rival sources of epistemic authority, it also lacks, despite its declared philosophical investments, the internal capacity to check its own privileges or question seriously its own sources of legitimacy—instead actively *delegitimizing* the knowledge and experience of almost all groups and minorities superfluous to its protected interests.

In many recent expressions of indigenous epistemological protest against this perceived academic ascendancy—including those taken up by sympathizers within the university precinct itself—such criticism has become increasingly *ethical* in character, pointing ominously to the seeming failure of university knowledge-production on the Humboldtian model to deal at all satisfactorily with the contemporary crises of global justice, poverty, displacement and migration, gender and racial oppression and even possibly impending ecological catastrophe (Sillitoe 2010; Nakata et al. 2012;). This ethical turn often proceeds to quite challenging extremes, suggesting that the more recent evasions and silences of the academy in fact disclose longstanding and deep-seated moral failures and inadequacies of Humboldtian university culture. These encompass not only the disasters of the short twentieth Century, but the protracted histories of toxic knowledge production and disordered representation supportive in their various turns of empire, slavery and the rapacious exploitation of the earth's natural and human resources. For educational theorists such as Ronald Barnett (2014) or Peter McLaren (2006) the very idea of the university, indeed, is in this searching analysis simply too bloodstained and too badly marred by histories of discrimination and maltreatment to survive such disclosures in any remotely recognisable form. Inspired by activist readings of Nietzsche, Foucault and Freire, this kind of combative stance demands the epistemological and ethical renunciation of the university in its current (post)Humboldtian guise and its replacement by a renovated humanistic order the precise institutional character of which our own current traumas and limitations prevent us yet from clearly envisioning, but which will be very different from currently dominant ones. It leaves us, instead, with the compensatory but sporadically inspiring glimmer of the Derridean or Levinasian 'University to come', which, these commentators urge, it has now become our moral and educational imperative to create, whatever our position in the prevailing academic system (Anuik and Gillies 2012).

The educational philosopher and ethicist Darcia Narvaez has perhaps gone furthest, in her recent important study of *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom* (2014). Here (and elsewhere) Narvaez argues eloquently for a sweeping overhaul of the intellectual and moral priorities of the modern university, which restores the 'paths to moral wisdom' conserved by surviving indigenous cultures everywhere. These same pathways, she claims, are increasingly visible to the academy itself in the scientific confirmation by neuroscience, ethnography and palaeoanthropology of a distinctively human mammalian 'essence' around the demonstrable needs and desires of which all education should be radically reformed to save us from ecological and environmental ruin. Narvaez and other thinkers such as the philosopher Nancy Snow do not seek, as many 'indigenous' commentators and their supporters do, the effective abolition of the university, but they are unrelenting in condemning the errors and arrogance of the Humboldtian-

style curriculum of higher learning and its connivance with what they see as the destructive possessive individualism of the modern age. In this analysis the university is less the victim of the intractable forces of neoliberalism and more one of the key crucibles in which its disordered conception of human flourishing is forged (Grosfoguel 2013). This edges, of course, towards a kind of ‘ontological’ critique in which the university is not only admonished to enlarge its academic compass to include the perspectives and practices of non-Western, non-modern cultures, but where it is fundamentally reproached for intrinsic habits of being, acting, thinking from which it can barely hope to escape (Aman 2015).

It is not of course straightforward to exonerate the ‘Humboldtian’ university and its organisational and curricular apparatus from many of these charges, even if they may be contested in other ways or, indeed, shown to be overstated or incomplete. It remains important nonetheless to remember that whatever subsequent success it enjoyed as a design for the modernisation of higher education, the much-emulated Humboldtian experiment was in its origins a response to a social and intellectual crisis. Both Alexander and Wilhelm Humboldt reacted against a university culture they felt might indeed be moribund and unfit for purpose in a rapidly modernising and volatile society. Hence while the ‘Berlin Curriculum’ and its sources may certainly appear in some respects inflexible, *freedom* of teaching and learning (*Lehr- und Lernfreiheit*) also remained central to the Humboldt vision. Wilhelm prized an individual freedom of which he felt Church and state had combined to deprive university students. He therefore argued that students had as much right to choose their instructors and courses of study as professors had to decide what and how they taught. This implied a radical break with any form of set syllabus or monolithic degree programme and opened out student learning to something approaching that same intellectual *eros* that Alexander had experienced in his overseas travels. It also paved the way for advanced individual study and research in the form of the ‘post-graduate’ degree and ultimately the elective doctorate. Within this overall academic culture, moreover, both Humboldts insisted that every discipline should be subject to scrutiny under the principles of free scientific enquiry, untrammelled by religious or governmental dogma: ‘The aim of all scientific work,’ Wilhelm concluded, ‘is the enlargement of man’s character’ (1820/1963, 5).

At the very least we can surely argue that the preservation of these principles carries within it today a hospitality to change and a critical receptivity to divergent modes of thinking and learning from out of which a new global conversation on the future of the university and its regimes of knowledge creation might be generated (Sutherland 2014). Should we indeed be moving into yet another revolutionary phase in the history of international higher education, within which many older certainties and ways of working may pass away, and many hitherto silenced voices of the marginalized and the expelled may demand to be heard, then it is at least feasible that the deposits of insight and ‘wisdom’ established by and through the Humboldtian conception of the modern university may offer us vital resources with which to take our deliberations forward.

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