THE ACADEMIC CAESAR

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP IS HARD

STEVE FULLER

SAGE SWIFTS

SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

4

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE: THE PROACTIONARY UNIVERSITY AS A PLATFORM FOR THE ACADEMIC CAESAR

What follows is a vision for the university of tomorrow, one which takes forward the progressive features of the modern Humboldtian university, while regarding the institution itself as a whole greater than the sum of its academic and non-academic parts. However, in the future, what counts as human 'flourishing' will depend quite specifically on whether we treat *risk* as a threat or as an opportunity: that is, a *precautionary* or a *proactionary* attitude (Fuller and Lipinska 2014: chap. 1). The proactionary stance corresponds not only to the entrepreneurial spirit but also to Karl Popper's 'open society' and what Donald Campbell (1988) called the 'experimenting society'. It is a world in which people – in individual, collective and corporate form – are encouraged to conjecture boldly and to demonstrate their successes and make their mistakes in public, so that everyone might benefit. It is a world that aims to remove taboos and criminal sanctions from trying out radical new ideas, while at the same time recognizing that harms will be committed along the way, which in turn require recognition and compensation (Fuller and Lipinska 2014: chap. 4).

It is worth recalling that openness to risk has been a hallmark of modernity, which the Humboldtian university tried to underscore by exposing students to the cutting edge of research in their classroom experience – as opposed to their simply being taught the received wisdom. It was this general shift in approach that turned the university into a vehicle for 'Enlightenment' in the sense that Kant coined to capture his era. In this context, the Enlightenment may be seen as having embraced a 'symmetrical' approach to risk. On the one hand, the

past as a ground for authority was not nearly as secure as had been previously maintained; on the other hand, the future as a site for the realization of utopian dreams was not nearly as insecure. The former became the purview of the humanities, starting with the critical-historical approach to the Bible. The latter became the purview of the 'sciences', understood as those disciplines which took an experimental approach to data generation.

However, contemporary academia is biased against the proactionary and towards the precautionary on two political grounds, one relating to the decadent state of social democracy and the other to the power invested in institutional review boards.

By calling social democracy 'decadent', I mean that it is nowadays more concerned with protecting than empowering people. This point is very clear in Europe, where the precautionary principle is inscribed in European Union innovation-relevant legislation – resulting in, among other things, the public relations debacle surrounding 'genetically modified organisms'. Against this backdrop, neo-liberalism can seem like a breath of fresh air. Even though neo-liberalism fails to provide adequate recognition and compensation for failure, at least it removes paternalistic obstacles from the state, business and private individuals trying out new things. Moreover, because social democrats, like most of the political left nowadays, tends to focus on the losers (or 'vulnerable') in any political-economic regime, they can easily overlook the flexibility and adventurousness of neo-liberal regimes.

For a sense of what an empowering social democracy used to look like, consider that John Stuart Mill dedicated *On Liberty* to Humboldt – but the young Humboldt of *The Limits of State Action*, published in 1792, in the spirit of Kant and in the afterglow of the French Revolution – but twenty years before he became the academic supremo as we now remember him. In this context, Humboldt saw the universal task of education as the maturation of individual judgement, which in turn would result in the 'withering away of the state', as everyone could be trusted to make rational decisions on behalf of their own and the collective's interests. In such a world, direct democracy would reign supreme, and the state would be reduced to administering the decisions taken by this truly self-legislating polity. Of course, Marx later made this aspiration central to his Communist utopia, and Silicon Valley's fondness for tech-based replacements for state agencies may be read charitably as a 'post-educational' update of largely the same sentiment (cf. Morozov 2013). Put in terms of macroeconomic knowledge policy, Humboldt appeared to be calling for the state to plan for its own obsolescence by investing in an educational system specifically designed to wean people away from state paternalism. The proactionary

university aims to rekindle just this spirit that seems to have been lost from the political left.

As for institutional review boards – the university committees which license academics to do research on living beings – in the previous chapter I characterized them as a precautionary overreaction to the Second World War experience. They end up instilling a needlessly adversarial relationship between science and the public. A potential research subject is configured as someone who might be personally abused (and hence safeguards must be in place to prevent that outcome) rather than as someone who might contribute to a larger human project. Of course, I do not deny the need for regulatory oversight on research, including the need for personal consent. But rather than pitting science against the public, science and the public should be joined in combat against some common enemy, be it defined as 'disease', 'death' or even 'extinction'. In this respect, institutional review boards might be usefully reworked as vehicles for brokering joint-stock companies formed by researchers and subjects for mutual benefit. And in terms of worst case scenarios from adventurous research, the legal orientation should be oriented more towards compensation than prohibition (Fuller and Lipinska 2014: chap. 4).

An Academic Caesar could even provide a stronger steer by dedicating an entire research programme or even institute to 'securitized risk-taking' as a general world-view, which should attract banks and insurance companies as potential funders. The point is to look at ways in which people have tried to build trust and achieve results in a highly volatile world – albeit not always with success. Consider, say, 'megaprojects', in which great achievements result from great faith combined with great underestimation of cost (Flyvberg et al. 2003). There could even be a national or even patriotic dimension in particular countries, such as the United States, whose history has been punctuated by this sort of self-understanding from its early colonial days to the era of space exploration.

On the teaching side, a liberal arts curriculum could focus on 'courage' as the operative virtue to which all incoming undergraduates would need to be exposed. This would not only provide historical and philosophical depth to entrepreneurship, but also would help academics to re-engage the military, whose existence, if acknowledged positively at all, has been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Yet, the military has been more consistent than even business in fostering a 'strategic' mentality that plans for short-term setbacks and losses in service of long-term progress and victory (Tetlock and Gardner 2015: chap. 10). A courage-centred curriculum could be grounded in Plato's conception of *thymos*, a feature of the soul, dominant in the guardian

class in the *Republic*, which regards creation and destruction as potentially of equal value *vis-à-vis* some overarching end. A subtle contemporary assessment of this virtue in the context of consumer capitalism is provided in Fukuyama (1992: chap. 17).

However, there is a deeper, more inbred resistance to proactionary thinking within academia. Throughout this book I have referred to it as *epistemic rent-seeking*. This is the tendency for disciplines to become increasingly proprietary in their relationship to organized inquiry. A discipline is 'proprietary' in this negative sense if it can compel inquirers to acknowledge its ownership of a field of inquiry, regardless of the disciplines' actual relevance to the epistemic ends of the inquirers in question. This 'rent' may take the form of requiring that the inquirers undergo specific discipline-based training or cite authors in the epistemic rentier's field. If organized inquiry is a kind of intellectual journey, then disciplines impose tolls along the way, perhaps for no reason other than having made a similar journey first. The extended critical discussion of peer review in this book may be read as addressing the various micro-level perversions of academic social relations that result from epistemic rent-seeking.

The natural opponent of the epistemic rent-seeker is what the sociologist Randall Collins (1979) has called the 'credential libertarian' who sees disciplinarians as George Bernard Shaw famously saw experts more generally, namely, as a conspiracy against the public interest. I am the rare academic who shares this point of view: appeal to expertise is the problem, not the solution, of humanity's epistemic predicament (Fuller 2002: chap. 3, Fuller 2015: chap. 5). The advent of the internet has launched a new and robust wave of credential libertarianism, as we are now always only a few keystrokes away from finding challenges and alternatives to expert opinion on virtually any topic. In this context, I have written of our entering a period of 'Protscience' on the model of the Protestant Reformation, whereby people take science into their own hands just as the early modern Christians took the Bible as a text which demanded a direct response from them (Fuller 2010a: chap. 4). The Academic Caesar would be foolish to underestimate Protscience's potential to erode the prerogatives of academic judgement. Thus, I argued early in this book that the university's best bet for retaining its epistemic authority in the future will be to function as the second-order regulator of all knowledge claims, regardless of who happens to make them.

The policy implication is that the Academic Caesar should refuse to take disciplinary boundaries, or any such purely academic identity markers, as sacrosanct. This is the only obvious way for the university to remain both strong and nimble in an increasingly competitive 'knowledge economy'. It is also the

sense in which *interdisciplinarity* might be seen as an antidote to epistemic rent-seeking (cf. Fuller and Collier 2004: chap. 2). The 20th century's main science-based philosophical movement, logical positivism, plays a Janus-faced role in this strategy. On the one hand, it turned one discipline – physics – into the high-rent district of organized inquiry. On the other, the positivists demanded that other disciplines explain why they required theories and methods that differ from those of physics.

Logical positivism resembles the liberal imperialism promoted in Victorian Britain. Both were officially 'free trade' doctrines designed to promote relatively frictionless transactions in ideas and goods, respectively. But equally, both assumed a privileged position from which to espouse the free trade doctrine. In the case of the positivists, privilege was conferred on mathematics, be it symbolic logic or statistical representation.

The positivists expressed this line of thought as a distinction between the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of justification'. Science as an institution converts the idiosyncratic origins of discoveries into knowledge claims that anyone in principle can justify for themselves simply by examining the evidence and reasoning offered for a particular knowledge claim. In this way, individual insights come to be incorporated into a collective body of inquiry, which in turn empowers humanity as a whole. Thus, while a particular truth may have been discovered in a very particular way, the task of science is to show that it could have been uncovered under a variety of circumstances, provided the necessary evidence and reasoning.

It is easy to see how this positivist principle *could* sound the death knell to epistemic rent-seeking. The positivists themselves – much in the spirit of past imperialists and today's globalizationists – saw the removal of trade barriers as leading to greater integration and interdependency. Interdisciplinarity would be effectively fostered through a kind of anti-disciplinarity, at least insofar as disciplines would need to translate their specific jargons into a common lingua franca of intellectual exchange. Indeed, the positivists were early admirers of Esperanto, the would-be universal language promoted in the interwar years of the 20th century (Gordin 2015: chap. 5). Yet all did not go to plan. Just as in the economic case, the already existing power asymmetries between the disciplines played themselves out in this 'free trade zone'. While many disciplines became physics-friendly, non-physics-friendly modes of inquiry were consigned still further into the intellectual backwaters. Mathematics constituted a hidden barrier to free trade in this context.

Regardless of how the Academic Caesar resolves the problem of epistemic rent-seeking, the fact remains that academia trails behind 'Silicon Valley' in the

consistent cultivation of a proactionary attitude towards risk. By 'Silicon Valley' I mean less the actual place than the global ideology that emanates from that part of the San Francisco Bay area. In this sense, 'Silicon Valley' is comparable to 'Manchester' in the early 19th century, as the name for a radical liberalism that created an alternative and durable knowledge base outside the university sector, centring on manufacturing and including a much wider range of people than universities had hitherto taken seriously. For their part, academics spent most of the 19th and the early 20th centuries playing catch-up by introducing science and technology-based education and research facilities into their campuses – as well as opening up their doors (somewhat more slowly) to the populace as a whole. Academia managed to evolve in the face of the 'Manchester' challenge and came out a stronger and more complex creature as a result. Indeed, Clark Kerr's (1963) 'multiversity' was an adaptation that has worked well for two generations. But the challenge is deeper now: 2016 is the new 1816.

Like the Manchester liberals, the Silicon Valley liberals are in their own high-tech way vulgar utilitarians, contemptuous of established institutions. However, they are not without ideas – and capital – to get things done, with or without universities. Academia needs to be more positive and creative in response to this development. A look at how it adapted to the original Industrial Revolution would not go amiss. Generally speaking, academia should not try to compete with the private sector in terms of capitalizing innovation. In this respect, I disagree with Daniel Greenberg (2007), the most venerable US critic of academic-state-industry relations, who would have universities claw back their intellectual property rights from industry. However, academia can play – and has played – a more substantial role than simply supplying relatively cheap intellectual labour for industry. Universities are where the 'normative horizons' of innovation are set, which means establishing standards of technical performance and cognitive frameworks that enable innovation to be understood systematically so that it can be taken to the next level. Moreover, all of this is streamed through a regularly revised curricular structure that allows people from all backgrounds to participate in the process. This is what I mean by calling for the university to be the producer of knowledge as a 'second-order good'.

In this context, an aim of general education must be to make people smarter than the environments in which they increasingly live and work. This standard will eventually serve to determine whether humans are needed at all – or, politely put, 'surplus to requirements'. Here I blame Steve Jobs, who created products with such 'smart' interfaces that they effectively dumbed down

their billions of users by channelling their responses within an expected range, resulting in a second-order form of 'trained incapacity' that exceeds even the wildest fears of the phrase's originator, the early 20th-century US economist, Thorstein Veblen. Thus, even people who formally work in the 'IT sector' do not usually know that much about coding, algorithms, let alone the emerging political economy in which this new capital is being generated. Thus, alongside its classical goal of plugging students into established and 'classic' forms of academic knowledge, general education needs to address this very serious blind spot in contemporary culture. Rushkoff (2010) provides a call to arms, which hopefully will help raise the stakes in the need for 'digital literacy'.

The issue of general education raises the final point about the future of humanity, which returns me to the original theme of competing attitudes towards risk. In the last few years I have written of 'Humanity 2.0', which presumes that 'humanity', understood as an upgraded upright ape, has reached a crossroads in its development (Fuller 2011, 2012). It can identify with either (1) where we have come from (i.e. our status as one among many species on planet Earth) or (2) where we might go (i.e. the prospect of substantially altering if not abandoning those animal origins, including existing in some silicon form and/or in outer space). The former is what I call 'down-wing' and is associated with the precautionary principle; the latter 'up-wing' and associated with the proactionary principle (Fuller and Lipinska 2014: chap. 1).

I believe that this polarity will replace the existing right–left ideological polarity in the 21st century. The question then is how to teach it effectively. Here our species' relationship to the environment will provide a significant context. Will that relationship be defined as one of greater co-dependency with nature, *à la* down-wingers, even if that means scaling down humanity's reach over the planet? This has been the traditional stance of the ecology movement and certainly dominates contemporary discussions of global warming. Or, will our relationship be defined as one of greater 'decoupling', say, through the discovery of energy-dense materials (e.g. nuclear) that require much less biomass so as to enable us to continue progressing as we have? This is the way of the up-wingers, a notable case of which are the 'ecomodernists' (Nordhaus, Shellenberger et al. 2015).