



Ruin and the University: Justifying Higher Education to the Community

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DISTINCTIONS between the community and the university are always invidious. Historically, such distinctions have tended to portray universities as bastions of privilege—thereby suggesting, by implication, that the community would necessarily be in a resentful and deprived relation with the university life and its ethos. There is, indeed, no doubt that universities were for a long time institutions where the intellectual and pragmatic rewards of higher education could be imparted to the sons (for the daughters were ineligible to receive such rewards) of elites which, through a selective mechanism that was only fitfully meritocratic, protected their own exclusiveness. The very undemocratically determined constituencies of universities in the past must surely be regretted, and the greater representation of diverse sectors of society in the modern university unqualifiedly applauded. It must be said, however, that the greater fairness and probity in the recruitment of students to modern universities have not been quite enough to dispel the view that institutions of higher learning remain ivory towers. To a large extent, therefore, the simplistic binarism between the university and the community survives.

That it is a simplistic binarism cannot be doubted, for in fact the university and the community could never have been diametrically opposed. Even the most fiercely exclusive university would have in some way benefited the community, however limitedly (for instance, through the exclusive but nonetheless not unuseful perpetuation of dynasties of doctors, lawyers and architects) or grudgingly (one remembers that even that great humanist, Matthew Arnold, feared that democratisation would lead to philistinism and decadence). And modern universities—at least in countries where the requisite reforms have been put into place—need not, in theory, be defensive about their role. The training they impart has after all grown considerably broader, both in terms of disciplinary scope and of the numbers and backgrounds of those who receive that training. The universities' contribution to the community, passed on in various forms and with varying degrees of directness, has as a result become correspondingly more visible and indeed indispensable. One might even say that there is now a permeability between university and community which rubbishes any notion of their oppositionality. Yet universities will never quite shake off the need to ceaselessly justify their operations to the community. Present circumstances, in which relevance and efficiency have become implacable watchwords for universities, illustrate this all too well. Academics must 'publish or perish', administrators must demonstrate thrift and students must justify their loans and grants (or, in the local context, their stipends) to taxpayers who value parsimoniousness but who also expect excellence in higher education. It is therefore unlikely that some resentment between university and community will not continue to arise.

For it all turns, of course, on funding. The bottom line is that excellence in higher education cannot be attained on a budget. Some universities receive generous endowments and others are even privately and very handsomely financed, but most survive through having public funds supplementing their fee structure to a very significant degree. This is particularly the case for the University of Malta, which charges only nominal fees in those very few instances when it does levy a charge and which does therefore pay for its operations largely through public funds. Is it any wonder, then, that locally the debate about the relations between the University and the community continues to be an uneasy one, and not least because of the experience (over a timespan which scarcely stretches to three decades) of experiments with a narrowly utilitarian ethic for the University and of subsequent counter-policies which,

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though revitalising, have not been without their own problems? And is there not the danger that the community—much like a not over-rich parent who delights in the prospects of a promising son or daughter but who remains nervously mindful of the financial pressures of those prospects—might be tempted to mutter ‘You will ruin me yet!’

In its defence, any university will of course draw attention to the kind of ‘value-added’ advantage derived by any society which opts to invest in keeping in higher education those young men and women whose addition to the numbers of the gainfully employed might not otherwise have been deferred. In addition, some positive outcomes are very tangibly quantifiable. The University will understandably point to certain very creditable results, such as an intake which becomes more numerous and diverse by the year and an invaluable contribution to the country generally through the preparation of graduates in a range of disciplines. There is no doubt that, in these terms, the University is doing a lot that is right. But one should be worried if the University’s contribution to the community were to be justified largely on the grounds of what it ‘gives’ to the community, and on the understanding that the object of that giving must be amenable to statistical capture. For it is also true that much of what goes on in any university is, in fact, not always apprehensible to straightforward calculation of ‘returns’. This is because knowledge always retains something of the unworldly about it. This remains the case even after we have learnt the lessons, as we comprehensively have, of what Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault have had to say about the very canny ways in which knowledge goes about affecting disinterestedness. And a university which forgets that knowledge and ideas *are* sometimes worth pursuing for themselves, and that they will very probably not be pursued but in the university, will be poorer even if its finances improve.

This can be understood if the discourse of ruin alluded to above, in which it was suggested that all those who have a stakeholding in the university should guard against being ruined by it, were also to consider that it is equally vital to allay the prospect of ‘the university in ruins’. This latter phrase comes from a book by Bill Readings, who has some claim on the famous tradition of commentary on the relationship between culture and the university that includes Cardinal Newman, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis—even if it is highly doubtful that he ever shared that trio’s politics. In *The University in Ruins* (1996), Readings addresses a number of contemporary issues impinging on institutions of higher education in the West. These include the bureaucratisation of the university and its tending towards corporate culture, perceptions of ‘the bankruptcy of a liberal education’ and a rethought ‘idea of excellence’, and the developing relationship between the university and the community at a time when the former is alleged to have become ‘posthistorical’ and the latter marked by ‘dissensus’. But the thematic thread which unifies Readings’s study is the idea of ruin, with this understood in diverse senses of decay, despoliation, destitution and destruction, and as referring also to the importance of ensuring that those senses are not suffered in the pursuit of knowledge. Linked to this is the paradoxical attractiveness which ruins, in their various forms, have always had for the inquiring mind. In many ways, therefore, ruin is the fate of the university. What remains to be ensured is that the university is only ever ‘in ruins’ in the positive rather than negative sense.

For the University of Malta what, in practical terms, would this amount to? There is no doubt that the University faces a number of challenges and that its overarching project as well as its more specific ones would be ruined were it not prepared to continue to make extensive and even unreasonable-seeming claims for increased funding. It may find that this is unpopular with the wider community, which might be disinclined to think that increased allocations to the purchase of equipment, enhanced library stocks and a developing

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postgraduate identity on top of already well-established undergraduate programmes (to mention but a few priorities) are imperative. The community might well respond that it is time that the University sought to start funding itself, at least fractionally, and that might not in itself be a bad suggestion. The ultimate question, however, must surely turn on the issue of what the community is more prepared to indulge: a University that is ruinous or one whose project is ruined. One can only hope that it becomes intuitive that a moderately ruinous university (the oxymoronic phrase 'responsibly ruinous' might almost be risked here) is in the long run always better than one whose operability becomes, to all intents and purposes and through whatever means (or meanness), ruined. For ruins, however prettified they may be, arouse only the nostalgia that comes from the realisation that their reducedness can never be restored to the promise of the whole of which they once were part; ruinousness, by contrast, can hope to be redeemed. It is therefore up to the University, and all those who work, research and study in it, to look forward and ensure that its ruinousness is redeemed on a daily basis. Otherwise, and in more than one way, it will face only ruin. □

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