The Ivory Crumbleth:

Being a Summary and Report of my Forthcoming Work:

Dreaming in the Real World
Set Apart Unto the Cities of Spires

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Abstract

This paper is intended to serve as a report on the Laidlaw research I conducted in the summer of 2022, and a summary of its presentation in my forthcoming work, "Dreaming in the Real World: Set Apart Unto the Cities of Spires." The foundation of my research is an application of the concepts of utopia, and Michel Foucault's heterotopia, to the changes universities have experienced in the two centuries preceding our own, and to the movements and alterations still apparent today. It takes as a case study the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which have been at the centre of debates over education for several hundred years.

It will be immediately obvious that to report a summer's worth of historical research and philosophical thought in a few short pages is a great challenge, but I have tried to equip the reader with an understanding of the individual elements that comprise my argument: my interpretation of its concepts, and a picture of the history on which it rests. To accomplish this aim, I have divided the report into sections comprising the individual elements that I believe are foundational to my arguments and conclusions. I have included two sections detailing the concepts of utopia and heterotopia, and two sections providing historical sketches of Oxbridge, first of the period from 1850 to 1914, when the two universities were thought of as a sort of utopia, and then of the years 1914 to 2000, when the universities underwent a great and tenuous reformation, and emerged firmly entrenched as heterotopias. The final section explores contemporary trends and changes in our conception of universities, and asks what can be done to maintain or restore the institutions' unique and meaningful culture, even as social demands are ever increasingly placed upon them.

I
Introduction

To all those who work, live, and learn in the institutions we call universities, the idea of the university, and its conceived purpose and social function, may seem staid and unchanging. The world's elite research universities, in particular, are possessed of an imposing stature, and in their monolithic immensity they can make the individuals who inhabit them feel totally anonymous and without power. But a review of the history of the university, both as an idea and an institution, very quickly reveals that its purpose has been constantly contested, and its practices subjected to continual change.

In this paper I examine but a brief portion of that rich and varied history, from 1850 to the present. I take the universities of Oxford and Cambridge as a case study, chosen for the role they have played as models and examples of how elite universities might function, and their central position in debates about education in England throughout the two centuries preceding our own, but I seek to draw out themes and questions that can be applied to our conception of the purpose and worth of universities in general.

I first follow and trace the development of the university as utopia throughout the 1800s and into the 1900s. I then mark the transformation of the university from utopia to heterotopia - a process which is difficult to date with any real precision, but can be said to begin, or at least to pick up momentum, at the end of World War One. I follow this with analysis of the lengthy fight for how the purpose and role of the university will be defined in this age of heterotopia. To attempt any discussion of it is to discuss the whole history of the university in the twentieth century – a task which has taken scholars far greater and more prolific than I many volumes. In this paper I therefore limit myself to analyzing select moments which I think to be most pivotal or illuminating.

In the latter portions of the paper I suggest that the debate over what function universities will serve in society is now effectively settled - the arguments may continue, but the institutions' direction is decided - and that a new debate is beginning, over a different characteristic of heterotopias: that of separation.

Borrowing the rough but oft-used metaphor of an ivory tower, the sum of my work might be to say that since the First World War the ivory of the university tower has willfully been left to crumble – a decision which was made justifiably, but not without loss. Now universities are faced with the question of whether it is right for them to take the exclusive, separating shape of a tower at all. I explore how, while making needed progress in fairness, justice and accessibility, and continuing in their efforts to meet society's practical demands, universities can attempt to retain their unique culture and identity, and preserve their commitment to education as an ultimate good.

II
Oxbridge, 1850-1914: A Sketch of History

The period of years lasting from 1850 through to the beginning of World War One is widely recognized and fondly remembered as the grandest and proudest in Oxbridge history. The two universities were wealthy and independent, possessed of a rich, but alive and constantly renewing, intellectual tradition, and stood as resplendent symbols of their nation's glory.

The fanciful posture of this period has been immortalized in England's literary canon. In his poem, *Thyrsis*, Matthew Arnold, who famously defined culture as "the best which has been thought and said," wrote of Oxford as "that sweet city with her dreaming spires." [1] And Max Beerbohm, too, in his novel *Zuleika Dobson*, which was intended to satirize Oxford, would not prevent himself from writing

> *there is nothing in England to be matched with what lurks in the vapours of these meadows, and in the shadows of these spires--that mysterious, inenubilable spirit, spirit of Oxford. Oxford! The very sight of the word printed, or sound of it spoken, is fraught for me with most actual magic.*[2]

But the most enduring legacy of the era is found in a work of the philosophy of education, *The Idea of a University*, by the famous leader of the Oxford Movement, Cardinal John Henry Newman. The book, which began as a series of lectures, has become the essential and abiding text in the contest over the purpose of universities. In it, Newman takes an essentialist view, and argues that the value of any university is singular: to teach so that students might learn, and to disseminate knowledge for the benefit of all. He makes opponents of all those philosophers, commentators, and writers of policy who insist that all things be measured in terms of utility. He writes:

> *They insist that Education… should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if every thing, as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making Education and Instruction 'useful,' and 'Utility' becomes their watchword. With a fundamental principle of this nature, they very naturally go on to ask, what there is to show for the expense of a University; what is the real worth in the market of the article called 'a Liberal Education,' on the supposition that it does not teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures, or to improve our lands, or to better our civil economy; or again, if it does not at once make this man a lawyer, that an engineer, and that a surgeon.*[3]

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1 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1899), viii.

2 Max Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson, Or An Oxford Love Story* (London: William Heinemann, 1911), 190.

3 John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 153.

At the core of this vehemnt opposition, and in other passages in which he presents a positive argument for the value of education, Newman insists that education be thought of not as a private, consumer good, but as a public good – an assertion for which he still remains celebrated. Education need not justify itself to politicians and businessmen, he says, for its worth is self-evident. It is this appreciation of the self-evident worth of knowledge and learning, and of the places devoted to their pursuit, that form Newman's legacy. In the words of one influential reevaluation, he "understood the romance of Oxford," and saw in it "a thrilling emotion-laden higher order conception" of the life of the mind.[4]

The attitude of Oxbridge in this era can be effectively summed up in a particularly instructive phrase of Lytton Strachey's, who attended Cambridge in the first decade of the twentieth century: "the Great Court is the centre of the universe and King's Parade is Paradise and the backs the Elysian Fields."[5] Here we see, presented together in one sentence, the wistful romanticism of the poets and the self-assured righteousness of the academics. The grounds of King's College are a paradise and a refuge – like Elysium, an idyllic and eternal home for the virtuous and noble few – and though set apart from society, they are, nevertheless, its centre. They are a world unto themselves, without thought for the demands of practical utility: a world of dreams, but dreams more real than anything that life on the outside can offer.

III
Of Utopias

Readers will recall that the word utopia has its origin in Thomas More's 1516 narrative describing an isolated island bearing the word as its name and featuring idealized systems of government, religion, and other social practices. The word literally translates to "no place" and has evolved to represent a long tradition of imagined societies and worlds against which our own civilization can be compared and from which it might learn lessons. A utopia was an ideal – a world unto itself, that existed in happy peace without dependence on, or interference from, the world outside its bounds, for it was wholly oriented towards the service of an ultimate good.

But while many well-thought of writers, from Plato, through More, to Bacon, Huxley, and Wells, have been content to dream of other worlds and, in designing them, to draw out instruction for our own, other, more practically-minded persons, have departed from society and set out to construct their own utopian communities and to build what others have only imagined. In his *Short Introduction to Utopianism*, Lyman Tower Sargent calls the work of this latter group the tradition of "utopian practice" and explains that it is typically undertaken either so that people who hold beliefs or act in ways alien to society can live without interference, or to serve as an example, and to demonstrate to society the feasibility and desirability of another way of

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[4] Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics, and Geniuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 59.

5 Strachey papers, BL Add, MS 60707, ff. 96–96v.

life.[6] The longest standing Western example of this tradition is, of course, the Christian monastery or convent, and the student of university history will remember that it was out of monasteries and monastic schools that western universities developed. In truth, both Oxford and Cambridge remained institutions of the Anglican Church until at least 1845, and were not fully and thoroughly opened to people of other faiths until 1871.

It is clear, then, how universities developed their utopian elements, for it was in their purpose from their beginning, and their origin as intentionally planned, separate communities. And though they moved toward a secular outlook over time, they maintained their organizational structure oriented towards a singular good-in-itself: the knowledge which Newman sought to defend against questions of practical utility, and which possessed such ultimate importance that, in Strachey's mind, it gave to Cambridge the central position in the universe. With this commitment preserved, the universities could continue operating in the two modes of utopian practice, serving, in the words of William James, "as a nursery for independent and lonely thinkers [who] can be happy in their very solitude," and demonstrating before the world a way of life other than that which is ruled by business and finance.[7]

Here I ought to emphasize that I do not, and cannot, argue that the universities of any era actually were, or are, utopias. Perhaps the greatest challenge in every discussion of the nature and purpose of higher education is the tendency to regard the universities of the past in one of three ways: as having always been roughly as they are now, as being a very real utopia, or as being an equally real dystopia. It is clear that the universities of past eras were not ideal or perfect communities – their problems were divers and immense – but in reading opinions of university life from the same time, it is just as clear that its defenders regarded it with a utopian mindset. The university was not a utopia, but it nevertheless had features that enabled its defenders to see it as such: they found in it utopian elements and sought to preserve them. And as we will see in the following sections, when confronted by the specter of reformation and change, they often fought vigorously to protect what they loved. It is this attitude that has attracted my interest. Whether or not the universities of the past were ideal communities, if they possessed attributes that inspired a love for the academic community, and a belief in the great value of education as an end rather than a means – as a good-in-itself – then these things are worth uncovering.

IV
Of Heterotopias

In the late 1960s, the French philosopher Michel Foucault presented to the world his concept of heterotopias: the inverse of utopias, they are still set apart from society but exist closed off within its bounds rather than outside of it, and they are designed to serve a function determined by society rather than by themselves.

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6 Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

7 William James, "The True Harvard," (Harvard Commencement Dinner Speech), June 24, 1903.

The crucial and defining attribute of heterotopias is that they exist for the good of society.[8] Society controls them, and what it asks of them they will do. Structurally they may resemble utopias and appear to be oriented towards an ultimate end or good-in-itself, but their true end and object, for the sake of which they exist, is to fulfill society's needs.

Secondary to this essential trait, Foucault also identifies several other principles that define heterotopias, but in which they quite resemble utopias. They offer, for example, a home to "the deviant" – individuals who behave in a that is different from the "required norm" – which is very clearly a continuation of the latter mode of utopian practice identified by Sargent and recognized in the case of universities by James.[9] The two concepts also resemble one another in that they are both separated from society, but while utopias are necessarily separated by a physical boundary, Foucault suggests that the boundary of heterotopias can be physical or social: a boundary created through ritual or other requirements for entry.[10] This separation is necessary, he argues, so that heterotopias can continue the utopian function of serving as a mirror for society and demonstrating a different set of values for living.[11]

V

Oxbridge, 1914 – 2000: A Second Sketch of History

The *Oxford Book of Oxford* introduces the period of 1914 to 1945 by saying, "the Great War shattered Oxford, and obliged the University to come to terms with the world." This is no understatement, and it is only foreshadowing of what would come later with the 1963 publication of the Robbins Report: a set of findings and recommendations that is now certainly the most famous, and in some circles the most notorious, government document on education ever produced.

~~Oxford and Cambridge first accepted government funds in the year 1920, and they soon began to feel new pressures to conform themselves to the service of society's needs. The first demand among many was that the universities be opened up, and dramatically increase the sizes of their student populations. The pace of change was slow, but sure,~~

~~For a community governed according to utopic principles to come to terms with the world is, of course, for the community to become a heterotopia.~~

At the centre of these great and mighty changes, for many years, was Noel Annan, a former Cambridge student who later became the provost of one of the university's colleges (1956-66),

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8 Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, (New York: The New Press, 1998), 180.

9 Foucault, 180.

10 Foucault, 183.

11 Foucault, 184.

and then served as the provost of University College London (66-78), the vice-chancellor of the University of London (1978-1981), and finally as a member of the House of Lords (1965-2000), where he was a respected and frequently consulted authority in debates on education policy. Lord Annan was well-regarded by both sides of what was so often fiery disagreement, but he hardly stood above the fray. While recognizing the need for accepting more students, both male and female and of all social classes, and energetically encouraging the adoption of policies aimable to these causes, still he insisted that the first priority of universities must be the life of the mind. He began a book written on the history of eccentric Oxbridge personalities by declaring,

> *Universities exist to cultivate the intellect. Everything else is secondary. Equality of opportunity to come to the university is secondary. The matters that concern both dons and administrators are secondary. The need to mix classes, nationalities, and races together is secondary…. Universities should hold up for admiration the intellectual life. The most precious gift they have to offer is to live and work among books or in laboratories and to enable the young to see those rare scholars who have put on one side the world of material success, both in and outside the university, in order to study with single-minded devotion some topic because that, above all, seems important to them…. That is the end to which all the arrangements of the university should be directed. I still believe that this is the principle that should govern Oxford and Cambridge and our elite universities.*[12]

In this sense Lord Annan presented an argument for refusing to submit to a heterotopic status, subservient to society's demands, even while through his actions he demonstrated a genuine wish for, and belief in the importance of, a larger, and more diverse university community. He struck a challenging and often controversial balance, sometimes pleasing both sides and sometimes pleasing neither, in an effort to ensure necessary change, while also attempting to preserve the good towards which universities are oriented, so that their worth would be retained for all their new students to experience and enjoy.

VI
Present Trends and Future Concerns

But despite the best efforts of Lord Annan and others, still the universities of today face a crisis of identity. Year after year books are published with titles that are sometimes bold and inflammatory, other times insecure and ponderous, and, other times still, dreary and pessimistic. They range from *The Asault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance* (2012), through *What Are Universities For?* (2012), to *Dark Academia: How Universities Die.*

It may seem paradoxical that the value of universities would be so vigorously questioned at a time when more people than ever before have chosen to attend them. But further reflection

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[12] Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics, and Geniuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3-4.

reveals this to be an obvious and natural result. When nearly half the population of a country attends universities, but only a small fraction can find employment in academic work or in directly related cultural professions, it is of course wondered what purpose they serve and what value they offer. What benefit do the precious gifts which Lord Annan describes give to a student whose reason for attending university is to secure future employment? What reason have they to care for the single-minded devotion they observe, which puts aside material success, when the purpose of university for them is to ensure material success? How beautiful a society would be in which learning of the seven liberal arts provided adequate reason for the four years and the great sums of money spent on an undergraduate university education! But in no prudent society has this yet sufficed. And so now students rightfully ask, 'of what purpose, of what use, of what worth, is my university education?'

Writing in the New York Times in 1972, the author Anthony Burgess, who was then a visiting professor at the City College of New York, confronted this problem and asserted,

> *We are perhaps already in danger of seeing our existing universities turn into glorified high schools and super-universities, specializing in real further education, emerging for the benefit of an élite. In the technical field this is happening already. And, when inflation overtakes the new super-universities, super-super-universities will have to be built. This can go on forever. Ultimately, the gods of learning are not mocked.*[13]

But fifty years have now passed, and still this seems unlikely. Those who love higher education as a good-in-itself cannot place their hope in the creation of new universities – our institutions can only ever be what we ask of them. But in all areas of university life, from grand visions and aspirant principles, to the minutia of campus architecture and geography, ways of dining, and graduation ceremonies, decisions can be made to re-centre academic life on learning as a good-in-itself. But to take just one example from amongst these many factors, we can consider how the physical location of a university effects its culture and life: some are set apart, and exist as university-towns, while others are situated in the centre of great cities. The advantages of the latter location are immediately obvious. Schools such as the LSE in London, NYU in New York, and UofT in Toronto all enjoy close connections to the worlds of business and government and are able to offer to their students, teachers, and researchers an abundance of opportunities to engage with society and to enjoy a vibrant and cosmopolitan cultural life. Oxford and Cambridge, and many American state schools, may seem isolated and provincial in comparison. And yet, they, too, have their advantages. While metropolitan schools meld with the city and integrate, so that their boundaries become loose and it is difficult to tell where, if at all, the city stops and the university begins, schools which are set apart unto themselves have a unique ability to create their own culture and identity. Students at Oxford and Cambridge readily agree that when going up to school at the beginning of term, there is a real sense of departing from the regular world and entering into one that is unique and abides by its own principles. Like all choices, this is a trade-off, and the advantages of both possibilities are real and of great worth. But for those who love learning as an ultimate good, for those "independent and lonely thinkers

13 Anthony Burgess, "My Dear Students," *New York Times*, (Nov. 19, 1972).

who can be happy in their very solitude," the gift of an island that shares the purpose they have made primary in their life is worth the greatest price.

Select Bibliography

NB: This select bibliography cites the major works of scholarship I have consulted in my research. It is intended to accompany my larger work, and most of its entries are not mentioned, or dealt with in much detail, in this report. To do so would be impossible. It can, however, be taken as an indication of the direction in which I have taken my research, and is, itself, a valuable resource for those hoping to learn more about the subject.

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