

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research examines the history of universities, and especially changes in the conception of their purpose and worth, from roughly 1850 to the present. It takes 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.

The foundation of the work, and its argument's basic premise, is an application of the concepts of utopia, and Michel Foucault's heterotopia, to university history. Employing historical analysis and philosophical argument, I identify an apparent shift after the First World War from a conception of the university as an attempt to create an inward facing, real-world utopia to a conception that prioritizes broader, outward-facing social functions. This transformation faced immense resistance, but it was largely completed by the 1980s. I consider the arguments presented by both the advocates of this great reformation and those who opposed them, in an attempt to understand their competing values and to find a way to reconcile them and create a stronger university for tomorrow.

## YESTERDAY'S UTOPIA

The period of Oxbridge history from 1850 to 1914 is fondly remembered as the grandest that universities have ever seen. In a poem from the era, Matthew Arnold described Oxford as "the city of dreaming spires:" a place shut off from the world, existing unto itself.

The two universities were inward focused, and entirely independent from society's interference. Free to pursue their own ends, they carefully cultivated an ethos of transcendence that has not been replicated since. But with the acceptance of government funds in 1920, and demands for increased student numbers, both Oxford and Cambridge soon felt pressure to change, and to come to terms with 'the real world.' The Utopic university went largely extinct.



## **DREAMING IN THE REAL WORLD SET APART UNTO THE CITIES OF SPIRES**

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## TODAY'S HETEROTOPIA

In the late 1960s Michel Foucault presented to the world his concept of heterotopia. He enumerated six defining principles, which can be roughly taken to describe heterotopias as inverted utopias: places existing within society but separated from it, and designed to serve a social function. While utopias exist for the good inside themselves, heterotopias serve a purpose in the external world.

In the same years, universities were being transformed, and coming increasingly to resemble this new concept. They maintained their separation from society, but their purpose would be determined by society's demands. Supporters of the heterotopic university rightly claim that the model can better meet practical and economic needs, but its critics still feel a valid longing for what has been lost.

## WHAT WILL OUR FUTURE BE?

Although I argue that the university of today is now firmly entrenched as a heterotopia, it will be obvious to anyone who is an active member of university life that change is still occurring and has been dramatically hastened by the Covid pandemic. In examining current trends, I conclude that the university will remain a heterotopia in the sense of serving a social function determined by forces outside itself, but that other key characteristics, particularly the principle of separation, will see major reformation.

The future-looking portion of my research asks whether it is possible, and, if possible, desirable, to maintain elements of today's university heterotopia, and to restore elements of the past's university utopia, working in concert with the righteous and ever progressing impulse for necessary change. This component involves the study of several areas of university policies and planning, from grand visions and aspirant principles, to the minutia of campus architecture and geography, ways of dining, and graduation ceremonies.

In all these questions I resist the idea expressed by some philosophers that universities have a fixed purpose – history shows us that their purpose and value are constantly changing. But I affirm that whether as utopia, heterotopia, or whatever else may come, the good of universities will be found in seeking the good of the people who live and learn within them.