

Introduction

The university, as a kind of collective institution, is only about two millennia old: younger than democracies, organised sport (e.g., the Olympic games), monasteries, libraries, and guilds, though older than chartered corporations. Although they have usually depended on political patronage and religious orders to survive the vicissitudes of history, I will argue that the dominant recent type of university, the neoliberal university of the late 20th and early 21st century, is both too fragile to survive the needs of the next few centuries, and in important ways actually makes things worse. This short essay lays out a radical (in the sense of a return to the roots) revisioning that addresses the constitution of universities, the role of academics and students within them, and the need for universities to distance themselves from political power and business interests.

The core problem identified in this paper is twofold: first, universities worldwide inherit from early modern education—which was always imperial, colonial or missionary—an unthinking and deeply institutionalised inculcation of concepts and practices that constitute an ecocidal civilisation: individualism, competition, human exceptionalism, and extractive economics. Second, those same practices have developed into a pathological dysfunction in the actual social and economic operation of universities. The process through which universities have become the final stage in producing ideologically broken citizens of late capitalism has been robustly critiqued by Ivan Illich (Illich 1995), Paulo Freire (Freire 1970), and others. The institutionalised abuse of scholars, the process by which universities have become factories with horrific working conditions wholly unsuited to research or teaching, is critiqued under the rubric of neoliberal universities. Both problems are well-known. This essay builds on these two critiques by situating them in the existential risks of the present environmental, economic, and political crisis. Neoliberal universities cannot provide a solution to this existential risk because they are part of the problem.

I begin by describing the actual present threat to universities, which I take to be a symptom of the environmental, economic and political crisis; then explore the neoliberal university as it presently exists, using some ethnographic examples. I then look at the history of the university as a kind of institution, starting in Asia and explore key features of the pre-modern university. Through this return to earlier forms of the university, I distinguish two ideal types of the university, and ask what we can learn from these ideal types that might allow universities to survive—and help life on earth survive—catastrophic environmental and social change.

The apparent threats

The ratcheting stresses of economic injustice and a tangibly deteriorating global environment are fuelling populism, fascism, and fundamentalism across the planet. I believe that we are on the cusp of a serious struggle to define and defend the values and methods of education as our planet slides into a complex crisis that will be far more severe than most of us can easily comprehend. The World Bank made it very clear in a 2019 report: “There is growing agreement between economists and scientists that the tail risks are material and the risk of catastrophic and irreversible disaster is rising, implying potentially infinite costs of unmitigated climate change, including, in the extreme, human extinction.” Such risk is called an existential risk; it is a risk of such devastating consequences that even if the probability is relatively small, acting to neutralise the risk is the only sensible option. (p. 11 Krogstrup and Oman 2019) In purely environmental terms, Lenton et al set out a range of 9 environmental tipping points (2019) which act as cascades, rapidly amplifying already observable processes of global heating, sea level rise, and loss of biodiversity and leading to an earth system which is much more than

3°C warmer and has much more than 5m of sea level rise. They argue that we *may already have triggered* several of these cascade processes. Steffen et al lay out a similar analysis, arguing that if too many feedback points are crossed it will cause a rapid and irreversible shift to a new stable system ('Hothouse Earth') and we must develop political solutions that drastically change human behaviour so that we reach a different, less hostile, stable system (Steffen et al. 2018). It is one thing to theorize existential risk of environmental change, but—as Frankfurt School theorists might have noted—in fact the crisis is occurring in both base and superstructure, and the superstructure materially changes the base. What is missing from these analyses is any coherent discussion of the political drivers that are pushing the earth system towards collapse. While Steffen et al and, in a different line of analysis, Bostrom (2013), give a clear definition of existential risk, their definitions encode and reinforce political assumptions that may in fact be part of the problem. In particular they assume that the most severe risk imaginable is the loss of humans, and that global governance is a practical check on anthropogenic existential risks. Bostrom explicitly conflates “intelligent life” with humans and assumes that the implicit purpose of life on earth is the evolution of humans into posthumans. The human exceptionalism that underpins both positions is neither ethically nor biologically justifiable (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012), but it is a deeply held and largely unexamined feature of political-economic systems that has been identified as an ideological driver of biodiversity loss beginning with Lynn White (1967). Beyond human exceptionalism, both papers presume that global governance as theorised by Euro-American academics must be beneficial, and completely ignore the unequal distribution of wealth, the oppression of women, Indigenous communities, ethnic and/or religious minorities, and comparable forms of political and economic disenfranchisement as drivers of the political, economic and environmental crisis. They also overlook one clear political strand of the crisis, the rapid rise of authoritarian populist governments who base their appeal on a rejection of global unity. Such governments are now in power in the USA, Russia, Brazil, India, China, Hungary, the Philippines and elsewhere. As Ed Yong observed, these are the governments which have failed to protect their people in the Covid-19 pandemic, which is the first truly global shock of many to come. He quotes Sarah Dalglish: ‘When you have people elected based on undermining trust in the government, what happens when trust is what you need the most?’ (Dalglish quoted in Yong 2020)

These political threats play out with tremendous force for universities and their scholars. With the recent forced relocation of Central European University from Budapest to Vienna (Walker 2019), the continuing pattern of harassment and intimidation at Jawaharlal Nehru University (Gopal 2016; *The Week* 2019), the Trumpist attack on universities in the USA (Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2020a) (see also here, where the restriction is partly eased Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2020b), and the slow crushing of intellectual and student culture in the PRC (Ma and Rui 2020) and now Hong Kong (Graham-Harrison and Wintour 2020), we can see clearly the developing threat to the liberal arts university. All of these universities were attacked as part of overtly nationalist government projects in Hungary, India, the USA and the PRC respectively. While the cosmopolitan and critical project of universities has been a frequent target of intolerant and insecure political regimes in whatever country, these are nations that contributed powerfully to the international ideals of liberal arts education as it evolved across the 20th and 21st century. There has been significant local and internationally networked outrage and resistance—academics have circulated petitions across international networks and universities and their allies have mounted court cases—but the threat to universities from their own governments is now a feature of the most developed nation-states in the 21st century.

Blunt external threats flow together with a long-term, thorough and deliberate corrosion of universities as primarily institutions for learning and research, undertaken as part of late capitalism. Almost all

universities worldwide now fully participate in the neoliberal paradigm (Ball 2012), not just in the North Atlantic world (Ergül and Coşar 2017). Even regional Minorities universities (民族大學) in rural China that I have visited were keen to compete for international student income and engaged in an intensive audit regime, even if they were nominally operating within a planned economy. The commodification, oppression, and infertility that results has been documented and critiqued extensively: a good summary can be found in Bulaitis (pp. 4-6 2020), but see also Hall's description of the university as an 'anxiety machine' (Richard Hall 2014), Smyth (2017), and the essays in Breeze et al (2019). Already, over a century ago, Thorsten Veblen warned that North Atlantic universities had developed into an historically unique form inextricable from the interests of big business (Veblen 1918). It is precisely this commodification of students and researchers flowing internationally that Trump correctly saw as a vulnerability that he could target when he wanted to attack the university sector in the USA. From the side of the academics and students, this was perceived as a crass attack, in a rare moment of legal and political advancement for Black people, on the inherent dignity of internationally mobile students (who are, as one academic pertly observed, are "mostly brown or black"). For university administrators, however, this was simply a further threat to income streams and an insult to their autonomy by an incompetent buffoon who threatens any number of international capitalist processes and projects.

Within many universities, the rot is profound. As an academic who has worked in the USA, UK, Canada, China, Nepal and Bangladesh, I have been a participant observer in an increasingly anti-intellectual community. During friendly chats with middle-level managers in UK universities, I have heard the academics and researchers described as "parasites" and "aphids" that need to be "milked" by the industrious "ants" of the administration in order for the university to succeed. Academic colleagues have pointed out that university-wide management training programmes are often very hostile to academics, perhaps as part of trying to undermine academic solidarity among academic staff being groomed for management. This process, of deliberately breaking the bonds of academic solidarity, is well understood. Several colleagues who began on the research side of the university and moved over to administration described themselves as 'going over to the Dark Side', and management at one university actively sought to break down individual academics' disciplinary loyalty and collective identity through professional associations as it ran contrary to the interests of the institution. Given the present inextricability of the university from profit models and the prevailing anti-intellectualism of populist governments, this situation can only deteriorate. The external political attacks will get worse as political polarisation is sharpened by diminishing resources, disasters, and increasing economic disparity. The academic freedom of universities and education generally will be increasingly constrained, and the 'business case' for further disenfranchising academics will become ever stronger. As Ulf Schmidt wrote, 'The problem cannot be fixed unless politicians and university leaders recognise that the commodification and commercialisation of knowledge is fundamentally flawed.' (2020)

The systematic threat

What I have written so far is not particularly startling reading for most academics, though it may be grim reading for students looking to attend university. The real threat to universities, I think, is different and worse than this. Our rapidly deteriorating material context—global heating, pollution, disease, sea level rise—leaves us in a structural bind where, because universities can only be imagined as profitable businesses, the impending environmental crisis will destroy the modern university as we know it, not just as a social and economic form (*gesellschaft*) but as a materially possible kind of institution. This is not unlikely: in South Asia between 1200 and 1300, universities simply ceased to exist: the campuses were ransacked and it was not possible to rebuild them. The mid 21st century

university is a fully globalised institution, dependent on international flows of capital, students, and researchers; key aspects of its operation are outsourced and privatised, including much of its actual infrastructure; and it fully incorporates anti-intellectual audit and management strategies. This creates a brittle institution unable to listen to its own expertise and unable to respond nimbly to crises, because it is shackled through ideology as well as outsourcing and privatisation, to short-term profit models. As a type of institution it is deeply vulnerable to systematic changes in the global environment. Like battleships or the slave trade, the conditions that allow for its reproduction will end. If we do not re-imagine the university—its social and economic form, its material basis, and its actual purpose—then the university as a kind of institution will arrive at an evolutionary dead end and expire.

We are seeing, in 2020, how one relatively mild shock from the environmental, economic and political crisis, a zoonotic outbreak event has created unsolvable challenges for many universities, and the response has in most cases been to move much teaching online. While this is framed as a measure to prevent the spread of Covid-19, it has also been seized by management at some UK universities (with strong protest from academics and students) as a way to disempower academics (Rachel Hall and Batty 2020). At the same time, some USA universities with private housing agreements have been pressured by their corporate partners to force students to return to student housing and risk infection and death (Seltzer 2020). This same conflict—between universities as profit centres and universities as shelters for scholars and students—has now exploded in the UK, where as I write (September 2020) hundreds of newly arrived students are locked down in quarantine in their student accommodation.

There are serious risks here for academics and students, who are further commodified and marginalised, especially as university administrators panic in the face of collapsing enrolments, loss of international students, and the sorts of political attack I described above. The move to online teaching actually makes the whole university more fragile and vulnerable to further shocks. I have already observed that outsourcing key infrastructure and processes to for-profit companies is a serious risk; most universities, without any advice from their own experts, have chosen to use closed-source, centralised learning platforms such as those provided by Google or Microsoft. There are loud warnings and thorough critiques, from pedagogical as well as economic angles, concerning the way education technology companies are using the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunistic disaster. Moreover, where universities (and indeed, local education authorities) have bought into a cloud-based plan that requires extensive access to remote data centres, they are implicitly trusting the security of the global data communications hardware. Yet subsea cables and data networks are highly vulnerable both to rapid environmental change (sea level rise, storms, overheating surges) and to [bad politics](#). This question of infrastructure can be extended; we hear in the UK how universities are investing in physical plant and prestige buildings, but how much of that investment takes into account worst-case predictions for sea level rise over the next hundred years? The University of Aberdeen, for example, will be a vulnerable seafront campus quite soon (but so also Bristol, London, Hamburg, Shanghai, Singapore, Karachi...). Not every region or city will invest in sea defenses; many will choose strategic retreat. Even where the physical plant of the university is not threatened by actual sea level rise the social, political and economic upheaval will be far greater than most of us—insurance modellers and defence specialists aside—can imagine.

The cauldron of the new university

For universities outwith the industrialised countries of the global North, these sorts of political, economic, and environmental challenges are part of ordinary intellectual-academic life. In Bangladesh, for example, students often use mobile phones to access the internet and a political crisis can lead to a

country-wide shutdown of internet services. Useful access to libraries means access to stable texts that don't require an internet connection to be used: PDFs or physical texts. Forms of knowledge commodification for profit that depend on stable high-speed internet (such as e-lending or online journal access) simply don't work. Flooding from cyclones and king tides is miserable but not surprising. Faculty and students share tools such as Sci-Hub and Library Genesis in the struggle to teach and learn, and accept political or climate disruption as part of the ordinary. There is skepticism towards the idea of academia as a viable livelihood; as a colleague at the national university of Nepal explained to me in 1995, every professor has a real job that feeds their family—though often a university appointment can lead to income, whether through leveraging social capital (consultancies, government work), various degrees of corruption (writing textbooks that become required purchases for a class, fiddling admissions or exam results), or some other route. This is not true everywhere, and in some countries a university job provides an adequate and reliable income, if not a particularly large one.

These are the crucibles in which a future university will be forged, a university that adapts to rapid ecological and political change and creates students who grasp, deeply, the sickening contradictions between real life in the majority world and the expectations set by an inappropriate and oppressive model of education based in colonial domination. Yet the funders, the administrators, and the parents who send their children to these universities all aspire to a "real" university—that is, a fully neoliberal university in the Global North—which is still held to be the inheritor of a numinous set of inspiring values that somehow create the comforts and wealth of that world.

The genealogies of the university

Where did universities as we presently have them come from? The history of the university is a surprisingly global history, taking in South and East Asia, the Islamic world, early modern Europe, and the colonies established by European powers. The first universities were Buddhist institutions in South Asia. Many sources argue that Takṣaśīla, now the archaeological site of Taxila in Pakistan, was the site of the first university, and there is good evidence that it was a major centre of learning from at least the 4th century BCE. The story of Jīvaka, a doctor who joined the Buddhist saṅgha and treated Śākyamuni Buddha, is early evidence for the importance of Takṣaśīla as a centre of learning (Salguero 2009; Zysk 1991, 52–61). Jīvaka is sent to study there because it is widely known as the best place to study medicine. Of course, stories and teaching from Śākyamuni's time circulated as oral literature for centuries before they were fixed in writing. Although various details of Jīvaka's story reflect a narrative that was written down centuries after the events it describes, there is such strong support for the story of Jīvaka across multiple sources that we can confidently assert that there really was such a person, and that elements of his biography are likely true. However, neither Jīvaka's story in the Buddhist canonical sources, nor other mentions of Takṣaśīla in the Sanskrit epics, actually refer to a university. We assume, given the sources, that if there were a university at Takṣaśīla it would have been a Buddhist monastic university, and there certainly is archaeological evidence for several Buddhist monasteries, but no conclusive evidence of a distinct university. Rather, the Jīvaka narrative describes a great teacher of medicine with their own circle of students, in a city where there were other teachers of medicine as well (Scharfe 2002, 141). This social and economic arrangement for teaching, the *gurukula*, was widespread in early Asia. It does not transcend a particular teacher and it does not attract patronage as an enduring foundation. Rather, reputable teachers harnessed the labour of student-apprentices at the same time as they charged fees for teaching, consultations, and performing rituals. We have no evidence, literary or inscriptional, for any economic framework for teaching beyond the *gurukula* at Takṣaśīla.

Nālandā and the South Asian university

Hence, while it may well be that there were many teachers and students in Takṣaśīla, the first university for which we have incontrovertible evidence is Nālandā, the Buddhist monastic university founded by Gupta kings in the 5th century CE. During the Gupta period, and indeed for centuries before, Buddhism was the cultural and intellectual norm across much of South Asia. Modern South Asian histories often forget that the origins of classical Sanskrit literature, for example, are all Buddhist: the compiler of the first dictionary (*Nāmaliṅgānuśāṃsa*), the first medical writers (the authors of the *Cārakasamhitā* and the Bowman ms.), and the first epic poet (Aśvaghoṣa) were all Buddhist authors. Given the dominance of Buddhist intellectual culture, it is not surprising that the shift from scholastic monasteries to a monastic university happened at a Buddhist monastery complex. Yet, in the same way that early universities in Europe were Sunni or Catholic, Nālandā was both a Mahāyāna Buddhist institution and a fully open and cosmopolitan university attracting bright students of any ascription from across Asia. ‘With the evolution of Nalanda Indian higher education entered a new phase, transcending sectarian and denominational lines and moving in the direction of a true university.’ (Scharfe 2002, 158)

Although Nālandā was a collection of monasteries, as an educational foundation it had its own financial support, academic teaching staff, and support staff. In this sense it is comparable to early European universities which had colleges—associations of students and teachers—within a larger framework, and an endowed foundation. Correlating East Asian pilgrim histories with epigraphic sources, we can be sure that Nālandā as a university was founded no later than 455 CE through a major donation by Kumāragupta I Mahendrāditya (r 413–55), known to Xuanzang as Śākrāditya (Kumar 2018, 18). Successive donors, including wealthy merchants as well as rulers from Magadha, Bengal, and even Indonesia continued to endow Nālandā, sometimes building new monasteries at the site. So, too, other Buddhist universities were founded: Vallabhi, Odantipura, and Vikrāmaśīla are the best known, but we do not actually know how many Buddhist monastery centres also functioned as cosmopolitan universities. Major endowments typically consisted of inhabited land and its production capacity: a king might give one or more villages with their agricultural land, which meant that the agricultural produce and/or the tax revenue would flow to the university. Rather like the investment or land portfolios that some modern universities have—and in opposition to, say, a one-off cash gift, or an annual government grant—this provided a steady material and financial basis for the teaching mission of the university. Furthermore, even though there were large royal endowments, the stream of donors also included lesser officials and wealthy merchants. The endowments seem to have lasted well beyond the reign of any particular king and, so long as the overall sociopolitical context was stable the university could endure changing political fortunes.

Students at these universities were taught a curriculum that included medicine, grammar, and non-Buddhist philosophies as well as advanced studies in Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and meditation. They were both monastic and lay, and studied under several teachers all within the one institution. The level of scholarship across all subjects was such that non-Buddhist scholars came to study their own traditions as well (Scharfe 2002, 151–54, 158–59). Applicants had to pass an entrance examination, follow well-defined curricula, and pass final exams. These universities had a significant physical presence: there was a large parkland campus (Rajani 2016), monasteries that provided residential quarters and local community, and large libraries that contained a wide range of literature in multiple languages so that scholars could follow developments in multiple disciplines and traditions. ‘One sign of their comprehensive and tolerant approach was the existence of large libraries’ (Scharfe 2002, 159). So far as we know, there was no agriculture undertaken at the site; food flowed to the monastery from the surrounding communities in the form of donations.

It is worth observing, however, that because Nālandā was a monastic institution, the university staff were constrained by the ethics of the monastic community: they did not expect a personal salary. Rather, the role of teacher within such an institution would have been a high office with extraordinary responsibilities and thus also subject to intense scrutiny. This does not mean the teachers were also highly ascetic; there were both lay and monastic teachers (Scharfe 2002, 140). Gregory Schopen and especially Shayne Clarke have shown that nuns and monks who owned property (Schopen 1995), had children or were married were an ordinary feature of ancient South Asian Buddhism, just as they are in many modern Buddhist traditions. Clarke makes the point that reputation certainly did matter, and precisely because monastic jurists worried about reputation in other contexts, we can infer that families within monasteries were neither unusual nor perceived as a breach of discipline (Clarke 2014, 155–56). To become a teacher in such an institution would have brought great prestige (and influence) to their wider family, even if the teacher themselves was bound to a modest lifestyle.

We are now in a position to outline the first of our ideal types, the monastic university. It is a distinctive kind of voluntary, strongly communal, social organisation, dedicated to study and teaching, that is enclosed and protected by a legal and economic framework that guarantees its independence from changes in political patronage. It is like an abbey in that the teachers are supported by the institution, and consequently they do not expect, or compete, to accumulate significant excess wealth. If they did so, it would undermine the principle of a voluntary, virtuous, and ascetic community that motivates the legal and economic framework that protects the organisation. In this sense, it is both a *gemeinschaft*, inasmuch as it is a naturally organic community arising from deeply shared values and orientations and bound by its own laws, and a *gesellschaft*, inasmuch as it is a corporate body funded and protected from its external context—where living by those same values would be impractical if not impossible—by legal and economic frameworks executed according to the norms of that external context. The boundary between these two is crucial, as we have already seen; monastic legislators were concerned with reputation. The moment it is breached (by the emergence of a class of paid professional administrators who lay claim to the moral authority of those inside the *gemeinschaft*, for example), the university fails. By maintaining that boundary, the university is insulated. It does not serve the interests of the state; rather it is cosmopolitan, drawing in students and teachers from outwith whatever polity it might be in. Moreover, even if it has its origins in a specific institutional tradition (for example, Buddhist monasticism), the intellectual toolkit of students and teachers is nourished through a wide curriculum including the sciences, humanities, and medicine, including the teachings of rival schools; and it is (relatively) free from constraints imposed by popular religious movements or political powers of any particular moment. All of this, though, comes with the explicit cost of a deliberate, collective modesty that sets it sharply apart from the *gurukula* model of profitable tuition. While the South Asian Buddhist monastic university was not self-sufficient and depended on donations of food, other regions in the Mahāyāna Buddhist, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian traditions did rapidly develop an architecture and economy of self-sufficiency. While the early Buddhist monastic code specifically prohibits fully ordained monks from engaging in agriculture, Buddhist monasteries in China were often self-sufficient and even wealthy; this could lead to reforms within the Buddhist tradition requiring a return to donation (Jia 2005, 45–46).

In fact all the Buddhist universities founded in South Asia before 800CE did have to endure very difficult social and religious changes. Verardi argues that as political patronage shifted to favour a new form of the Brahminical model of elite patronage, these egalitarian universities became the target of Brahminical religious riots (Verardi 2018). After the time of Harṣa, with the exception of the Pāla dynasty in Bengal, there is evidence in both literary and archaeological sources for the violent suppression of Buddhism and the sacking of Buddhist monasteries long before the Ghaznavids arrived.

When Turkic-speaking raiders in the service of the Ghaznavids swept across northern India in the later 12th century, these Buddhist universities had already survived centuries of religious persecution and were promptly reconstructed by local rulers. Even so, it would appear that local Brahminical opponents took advantage of the uncertain times to launch further attacks (Śāstrī 1942, 7–8). Rapid political and social changes led to a collapse in their support and by 1300, most of the great universities of South Asia had shut down and those that hung on struggled to find support, students or qualified teachers. Daughter institutions had long before emerged in the Newar city-states¹ and successors would develop in Lhasa, but these were never anything more than Buddhist training monasteries.

The Jixia Academy, the Imperial University, and the East Asian model

The alternative ideal type of the university arises in East Asia, and it derives its form from the Confucian tradition of learning in the service of the state. There were schools for training the male children of elite families as far back as -1000BCE, but these were not universities in any sense of the word. Confucius himself (551–479 BCE), for example, was a private teacher with a wide reputation, but he was not associated with any education institution (Lee 2000, 43) —indeed, part of his message was that proper education is both difficult and necessary in turbulent times. However, the records of the Jixia Academy (稷下學宮) in the state of Qi suggest that it was a significantly new kind of institution. Founded around 360BCE, it was sponsored and administered by the state, but attracted many teachers who then recruited privately for students. Lee notes that ‘the government exercised little control beyond providing a physical environment for the scholars to get together for debates and exchange of ideas’ (2000, 45), and in this sense it was not properly a university: tuition within the Jixia Academy was not delivered by multiple lecturers to cohorts of students, nor was there a central academic administration. It was apparently a home for scholars in several different traditions, including Confucians and Taoists. Nonetheless, the purpose of the academy was to foster scholarship for the good of the state and to train future officials who would serve the state. To that end, certain scholars were recognised as court academics (博士): they were the most highly regarded teachers, but also charged with advising the court. What was remarkable about the Jixia Academy was not just that the state had provided a space for scholarship, but that the state did not then prescribe its curriculum. The Jixia Academy did not outlast the state of Qi and the eventual unification of China in the 3rd century, but the idea that the state should provide a space for scholars endured.

When formal institutions of higher education did evolve within unified China they were strongly shaped by Confucian ideals. Institutionalised higher education was always understood to be a function of good politics, and this was formalised in the curriculum and the examination system. Moreover, the curriculum was fundamentally conservative. Already by the second century BCE, the Imperial University had been established and the correct curriculum had narrowed to be the five classics (Lee 2000, 47) and from that point onwards, for nearly two millennia, Chinese education consisted of both local academies and national universities that prepared students, usually from elite families, for government service through learning set texts. By the 7th century, higher education culminated in a nation-wide state-sponsored civil service examination, although actual recruitment to a post was always mediated through social connections. At its best, this was a highly meritocratic system that took boys —never girls—and trained them in the classics, law, critical literary theory, composition, several schools of philosophy, statecraft, rituals, and even some medicine before recruiting them to the civil service. At its worst it was a corrupt and perfunctory stage in the life of a young member of the elite families before they took up a safe government post. As a national educational system, not just a

¹ The ancient Buddhist monastery Tham Bahī, in Kathmandu, still described itself in 1992 as having been granted the status a branch of Vikramaśīla when Atīśa came to visit.

collection of universities, it was certainly the first and most influential in the world; the meritocratic civil service exam is now a regular feature of almost all nation-states.

This gives us the skeleton of our second ideal type, the state-sponsored university. In this model, higher education is shaped by national policy and universities teach in order to prepare students for a productive life within civil society. Faculty are state-certified professionals who expect to earn wealth and prestige from their teaching activities. In the Chinese case, overarching shared Confucian values determine the political arrangement that ensures the existence of the university and the work of the professors. However, there is no shared community of values, no *gemeinschaft*, among the professors, and certainly no shared set of values that set the university apart from the needs of the state. Moreover, this is not a research university; except where the state has a specific interest, any new research that might threaten orthodoxy or the position of the state is actively suppressed.

Because this kind of university is an organ of the state, it can never be cosmopolitan. Rather, it can take an active part in imperial or colonial projects to civilise new territories or peoples. This can happen both internally and externally: the university is the culmination of an aspirational process whereby individuals from marginalised communities gain entrance, through the university, to the civil service and thus attain power at the same time as they become agents through which their local cultures are assimilated to imperial values. Internally, this process is still reflected in the university system of the PRC, which differentiates a lower class of ethnic university (民族大學) with lower entrance requirements for non-Han, from the more highly regarded teachers' universities and full universities². Externally, we can see this process in the establishment of universities in the colonies of the European empires, such as the Universidad Nacional de San Marcos in Lima, founded in 1551, or the universities of Calcutta and Bombay, established as a result of Sir Charles Wood's recommendations to the East India Company in 1854. These universities were intended both to spread proper culture and values, and also to recruit colonial subjects to the imperial project of imposing civilisation.

From Baghdad to Europe and beyond

George Makdisi, in his meticulous institutional studies of schools and universities from Baghdad and Damascus through to the foundations of Bologna, Paris and Oxford, has shown that the crucial development was the legal codification of the Islamic college of law as a separate charitable foundation that could accumulate and dispense funding and was not reliant on constant donations from fickle rulers or wealthy merchants. The legal instrument through which such foundations were made, the *waqf*, allowed for considerable variation in the structure of the institution being endowed, but guaranteed that the endowed institution would be free from interference by the state or indeed by almost anyone else, including the founder should they subsequently change their mind (Makdisi 1981, chaps 1, section III). This legal form—the *masjid* (and later the *madrasa*) guaranteed by *waqf*—emerged in the 8th and 9th centuries CE under the Abbasid caliphate, perhaps earlier. However, in the late 10th century there is evidence that Badr b. Hasanawaih endowed a *masjids* with associated colleges where students could live. As Makdisi argues, 'its permanence and widespread character constituted an advance of great significance in the history of Islamic institutions of learning' (1981, 29); and by the 11th century, this in turn had evolved into the residential *madrasa* which provided everything needed for scholars and students alike to pursue research and teaching (1981, 32). Although Makdisi focusses his study on Baghdad, we may note in passing that from the 11th to early 13th centuries Córdoba, the

² For example, Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou province (known to be ethnically diverse), has three universities: Guizhou Ethnic University, Guizhou Teachers' University, and Guizhou University.

Umayyad capital in Iberia, 'was above all an intellectual centre, as symbolised by its seventy libraries. (...) Al-Ḥakam II, himself a respected historian, invited professors from the eastern Islamic world to teach at the Great Mosque and provided endowments for their salaries.' (Hillenbrand 1992) Córdoba's scholarly community included both Ibn Rushd (Averröes) (1126-98) and Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). It is worth observing, in terms of our ideal types, that the madrasa is also a community with strongly shared values, but that the political theology of Islam connects those values to a transcendent political ethics that does not so much stand over against the state (as in the case of Nālandā); rather it encloses every possible state within Islamic legal theory.

Makdisi is careful to distinguish between the *waqf* foundation and the European corporation as kinds of institution. The corporation is a distinctly European invention, which (as a non-human legal person) would be impossible in Islamic law (1981, 224). He argues that the European university develops as a hybrid which combines a college—a charitable trust, like a *waqf*, for the benefit of students and scholars—and a university, which is a specific sort of corporation that has the independent ability to confer degrees through charters. The university of Bologna had its beginnings as a corporation of students, founded in 1158; the first known college in Paris was a home for 18 students endowed by John of London in 1180; and Balliol, in Oxford, is the first college in England, endowed in 1258. However, according to Makdisi, the first institutions that combined both an endowed college and a university from their founding, were later: Sigüenza in Spain (1485), King's College and Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland (1494 and 1593), and Trinity College Dublin, in Ireland (1591). King's, for example, had both a royal charter and a papal charter, as well as an endowed college (1981, pp 229-30).

In parallel, Makdisi traces the origins of the doctorate—a license guaranteeing the freedom to teach and issue binding opinions over against the constraints of the state—to developments within the Islamic academy (Makdisi 1990, 26–38). The Islamic colleges of law were highly organised institutions with studentships, living quarters, and various grades of teacher from the floating adjunct, through the teacher holding down part-time appointments at several institutions, to the full professor with a secure chair and a substantial income (1981, 187ff). European histories of the university focus on the university as the institution which could confer the *magister*. In particular: at first, students at Paris and Bologna who were granted the *magister* had the right to teach anywhere (*ius ubique docenti*). The *magister* was a guild membership, and teachers organised themselves along the lines of the other medieval guilds, with distinctive costumes and rituals. This was a spontaneous development which did not involve ecclesiastic or royal authority. However, for subsequently founded schools, this right was not guaranteed. Hence papal or imperial decrees were sought and issued that asserted the same right of their graduates to teach anywhere without having to undergo a further examination. This process of standardisation was gradual and not uncontested; Rashdall notes that in the late 13th century, 'at Paris, even Oxford degrees failed to command incorporation without fresh examination and licence, and Oxford repaid the compliment by refusing admission to Parisian doctors, the papal Bull notwithstanding.' (Rashdall, Powicke, and Emden 1936, vol I p. 14) It was this process of standardisation through decrees that transformed the new universities from institutions that defined themselves to institutions that depended on the decrees of religious and royal authority for their legitimacy.

The European university, then, develops from a model that looks very much like our first ideal type: a community which is protected through legal instruments from interference by the state; but it very quickly comes to depend on authority for its legitimation. Through colonial expansion from the 16th to the 20th centuries, this European model of the university spread across the planet. Yet by the late 20th century, the original ideal was almost completely lost. While certain privately endowed institutions in

the USA and England did still retain a certain autonomy, universities in the rest of the world had become profit-driven instruments of the state and, increasingly, of large corporations. Even those universities with substantial endowments were caught in the trap of trying to maximise profits in their investments, as well as attracting corporate sponsorship. Research into the hard sciences increasingly required equipment, and hence investment, that the state would or could not provide; post-Cold War state capitalism required universities to show a profit, to compete on a marketplace, to show efficiency, to produce workers that could be fed to the economy. University research teams are now expected to compete for corporate, state, and private funding, demonstrate impact, and teach. Corporate sponsorship has, of course, a terrible effect on academic freedom. Moreover the loss of guild autonomy, and the surrender of legitimation to external authorities, has had disastrous consequences. We are now in the ludicrous situation, in the UK, where the Westminster government has awarded university status to for-profit corporations—including publishers who already derive stupendous profits by capitalising on free labour from the academic community. At the same time a large class of professional university administrators have emerged who capture large salaries in order to maximise international student recruitment and corporate sponsorship— and actively denigrated the worth of academic work. Labour conditions have deteriorated rapidly. In the USA, where academic labour unions have historically been very weak, university teaching staff shifted rapidly from secure, tenured employment to temporary contract positions; some professors are literally homeless, living in their cars. In China, where modern universities were founded during the late Qing and the Republican period, departments are again—as during the dark years of the Cultural Revolution—required to show ideological conformity. That precious sense of community and solidarity among scholars was destroyed, and the freedom to pursue unpopular or unproductive research is long since gone. Moreover, in the age of nation-states, every legitimate university is regulated through instruments of the nation-state. In many developing countries, this is the dreaded UGC, the University Grants Commission, which has a stranglehold over funding and curriculum. Even in the USA and UK, these schemes which pretend to guarantee quality and legitimacy have been converted into instruments of political control; as of 2020, in the USA it is no longer legal to teach critical race theory or give race awareness training in universities or government departments (Associated Press 2020), and in England and Wales, schools are no longer allowed use resources that critique capitalism or suggest civil disobedience (Jones 2020; Department for Education 2020, cf ‘Choosing Resources’). In the UK, national security legislation (the ‘Prevent’ laws) requires academics to act as informers against their students, and universities that fail to identify and report students whose visas are invalid lose the ability to recruit internationally—the only guaranteed source of profit for a modern UK university.

Emergency universities

Having sketched these ideal types, I now want to consider three particular examples of extraordinary institutions of higher education founded in response to difficult conditions: the Vivarium of Cassiodorus, the Flying University in Poland, and Śāntiniketan in Bengal.

The Vivarium was a monastery, school and library founded by Cassiodorus (490–585 CE) in Calabria at a turbulent time when the Eastern Roman Empire, under Justinian I, had completed a reconquest of the Italian peninsula. Cassiodorus was not born Christian, but converted at some point during his career as a skilled politician in the Gothic and Byzantine courts. In Christian histories of Europe the Vivarium is revered as a crucial link that preserved classical Latin literature at a time of civilisational collapse and also established the liberal arts—the *trivium* and *quadrivium*—as a model for future institutions of learning. Recent scholarship has not been so laudatory; while it certainly is true that Cassiodorus founded a unique institution that combined a monastic school where monks were trained

to use secular texts to aid in the interpretation of scripture, it does not appear to be the case that he did so either because he was preparing for what Western Christian historians of Europe call the 'Dark Ages', nor because he held non-Christian Latin literature in high regard. Rather, he was attempting to realise the educational plan outlined by Augustine (354–430 CE) in his *De doctrina Christiana* (Vukovic 2015). The Vivarium itself did not last much past Cassiodorus himself, and it is a matter of some debate whether the manuscripts he had gathered there were lost or were transmitted to other Benedictine monasteries. Hence, even though it was actually a thoroughly Christian institution, founded as part of a project to narrow the study of Latin literature to only that which was necessary for the understanding of Christian scripture, Vivarium has endured as a symbol of the determination to preserve broad-minded learning in the face of cultural collapse and widespread war { |see, for example, the Wikipedia article: | anon. Vivarium (monastery), 2020 | |zu:1885155:9Y7HTNTB}

Unfortunately there are no formal histories of the remarkable Polish Flying University (Uniwersytet Latający, 1882–1905) in English; although I have interviewed a number of Polish colleagues and friends who know it as a proud feature of Polish history, it does not seem to have been recognised outside the Polish language. It was an extraordinary covert university, which fostered Polish scholarship at a time when Poland itself had been carved up among Russia, Austria and Germany, beginning with the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772 and lasting until the restoration of the Second Polish Republic at the end of the First World War (1918). As the different powers began to impose repressive curricula that denied education to women and suppressed Polish language, history and religion, Polish language activists from the Positive Poland movement organised a programme of higher education which flitted from place to place around Warsaw in order to avoid detection. The Flying University developed a formal curriculum, faculty, and even a secret library. Perhaps its most famous graduate is Marie Skłodowska Curie (1867–1934), who studied at the Flying University until she was able to leave for Paris in 1891. The concept of the Flying University inspired a second covert university that operated under the German occupation during the Second World War, and a third incarnation during the later Cold War, which ironically is the best known in English language histories (Falk 2003, 42–43 and fn. 60, 61).

The Viśvabhāratī University in Bengal was founded by Rabindranath Tagore on his family's estates at Śāntiniketan in 1921 after he won the Nobel Prize for literature. It was intended as a cosmopolitan university of the highest standard, where teaching would take place outdoors and courses would be offered according to the demands of the students. It was intended from the outset as a response to the colonial predicament in South Asia. Tagore described the advantage of the Western university: 'In the European countries the diverse intellectual and spiritual ideas of the West are concentrated in every university. For this reason, the students who go to Europe from Asia come into touch with the great European mind from the very first. They have no difficulty in discovering the mind of Europe, because it is there before them as a unity.' (1923, 7)

In reading this, it is important to remember that in 1923—when Tagore wrote these words—anti-colonial sentiment was widespread, not least in Bengal. Gandhi was already in prison for sedition, imprisoned by the British Empire for his nonviolent protests. Tagore does not compare European and Asian education lightly; he goes on to say

The difficult is that our education is principally foreign and European. Our schools and colleges have made it their special object to give lessons through the medium of English and from an English standpoint. If we wish to study, in a scientific manner, the mind of Asia as a whole, there is no place in India where we may study it: we have to go to Europe, particularly to Germany or France, where scholars, because of the atmosphere of freedom

and a wide human interest in which they live, have gained a more critical and comprehensive view of the East than we have done in India itself. We have lost, in India, the creative mind; we have been satisfied [9] with secondhand knowledge and inferior imitative work. (1923, 8–9)

Tagore's project in founding Viśvabharati was to establish a centre of pan-Asian liberation that could resist the colonization of the mind. It was a direct revolt against the English-language colonial universities in South Asia initiated by Sir Charles Wood (mentioned above); and yet, in a remarkable way, Viśvabharati was always known as an idyllic and harmonious centre of intellectual and artistic exchange. European scholars such as Sylvan Levi, Maurice Winternitz, and Stella Kramrisch supported Tagore by coming to give lectures in its opening years, and many of the most famous Indians, including Satyajit Ray, Indira Gandhi, and Amartya Sen, studied there. One of my own Sanskrit professors at Oxford remembered her time there with great fondness, studying with deep commitment and rigour whilst comfortably seated on the ground under a tree.

What next?

We have entered a long period of environmental, political and economic instability. In the best sense of the word, we need universities to help survive the worst of the onrushing horrors, to help imagine better futures that are not built on extraction, inequality, and human exceptionalism, and to help find the paths towards those futures and the tools to build them. The university of the future will have to be re-invented; it cannot be a continuation of the existing university: from the perspective of the managers/owners of the existing university—who actively commit the crimes that have caused this present crisis—the university of the future is unimaginable. This university of the future will be very different indeed; but if we can imagine it, we can begin to weave it from the scavenged scraps of a collapsing 'civilisation'. Here I set forth a few ambitious notes on a possible university of the future.

We know that a rapidly deteriorating environment, where global heating, pollution, and collapsing biodiversity impose significant stresses on human societies, requires a complete reorientation of economics towards a managed degrowth model—and may well trigger economic collapse first. The present global service economy, with its energy-intensive patterns of shipping and travel, will be replaced by linked local economies and far more local systems of food production and manufacture; hence there will more need for training in practical skills—that is to say, a greater need for schools rather than universities. Yet we will still need universities, and more than ever they will need to be truly cosmopolitan, free of any external interference, and able to support students and researchers who have no other funding. This future university will need to respond to local needs—for example, actively contribute to the revitalisation of endangered Indigenous and local languages, ecosystems, and agroecologies—and at the same time weave its local community into a global network of scholarship and research. At the same time, it must be free of any profit motive, indeed it must actively oppose to the corrosive corporate capitalism that has driven our planet into this present crisis; and we may hope, pedagogically, it draws inspiration from the work of Paolo Freire (Freire 1970), Ivan Illich (Illich 1995), Ursula LeGuin (Le Guin 1999), and others. This points us towards our first ideal type, the endowed monastic university.

Key to Nālandā and its successors, however, was a shared set of values that allowed for a strong sense of collective identity against political externalities, and that allowed the teachers there to accept a relatively small remuneration. It is easy to outline some of the values that would be required in our university of the future, but it is not so clear how we might find or found a community of those values. Given the

catastrophic environmental and social damage that the dominant ideologies of the present have inspired, it is clear that among the values and practices that structure and inspire these communities must be radical ecocentrism—including an absolute rejection of human exceptionalism; egalitarian politics based in constant critical renewal of political representation and a constant effort to seek out and empower the disenfranchised; a rejection of commodification and extraction as the basis for economics; a commitment to an economics that prizes wellbeing of all living things over the accumulation of individual wealth; and an absolute rejection of xenophobia, colonialism, or protectionism of any kind. To be fair, these are only the most salient values that seem urgently required to me at this moment, as we tumble into a crisis that may well extinguish humans as a species—but it is clear that the university of the future will have to be built around humble, hopeful, critical communities of living beings. These would be intentional communities, like kibbutzim or, indeed, monastic universities of old: self-sufficient, idealistic and practical at the same time, local nodes in a global network. There would be rituals that incorporated new members, rituals for ensuring fair governance, and rituals for periodic reflection on existing rules and rituals.

At Nālandā, the system of values was Mahāyāna Buddhism; and if we examine Mahāyāna Buddhist monasteries through time, they do indeed have many of the features we need, including an artful combination of philosophy, ritual, and commitment through binding vows woven together and expressing each other. In fact there are already Buddhist universities, but any presently existing universities are almost certainly too deeply implicated in the international exploitation of students, the commodification of knowledge, and nation-state systems of audit and control to evolve; but they might act as the seeds of the university of the future. So, too, present developments within Catholic and Islamic theology suggest that a genuinely ecocentric ecopolitics could emerge from those communities even though the Abrahamic traditions have, to date, been ideological drivers behind human exceptionalism and its unavoidably ecocidal economics and politics (Taylor, Wieren, and Zaleha 2016). It is also likely, as Bron Taylor has argued, that there will be new communities of value—‘dark green communities’—that emerge as societies across the planet awaken to the seriousness and scale of the present crisis (Taylor, Wright, and LeVasseur 2019).

In whatever form it takes (and it may well, given present efforts, emerge as a hybrid or patchwork of other communities), there will need to be a compelling vow or code that gathers up and commits the *magisters* of this future university; it will need its rituals and a recognisable guild identity. Considering the history of its precursors it is most important that the process for awarding degrees and validating universities is *not* handed over to external authorities. Rather, in the early days of the university of the future, we must endeavour to develop a strong, international, radically inclusive, and self-critical guild of scholars who are able to regulate themselves, free of external influence. Admission to the guild would be by examination across a range of skills and commitment to guild values, as well as academic expertise. Rather in the manner of the activists in Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* who resisted the regime by memorizing books, our scholars must embody a commitment to ecological justice and humble scholarship through mastering a range of languages, including at least one Indigenous or endangered language; through undergoing some sort of ritual that strips them of all social privilege, so that they are on a fair footing with the most disenfranchised; through demonstrating a profound understanding of their chosen academic discipline, as in the present doctoral examinations; and through taking up vows comparable to monastic vows that commit them to an itinerant life of poverty, wisdom, academic rigour, social and ecological justice, and symbiotic respect for all life.

Just as we must consider the social fabric of the university of the future, we must also imagine its physical and ecological plan. One possibility is a residential and self-sufficient community, embracing local ecological and social features, which would provide the resources to support a wide range of

research disciplines and a large library. This suggests a collegiate university, with residential facilities for scholars and students alike, as well enough space for agroecologies: orchards, gardens, woodlands, ponds. There is a significant tension between what seems a clear need for a significant amount of land and buildings, and the requirements of a humble, egalitarian economics. Again we may have to look to the history of monasteries and the madrasas: while the communities within the monasteries practices a humble economics, what they did and what they represented was sufficiently worthwhile so that substantial endowments of land and money were made.

Yet given the sheer unpredictability of the environment over the next centuries and millennia, we must also consider the likelihood that our university of the future might need to move its campus altogether. Certainly if we were to try to establish such a university right now, in the present political climate, it would necessarily be revolutionary and probably fugitive—like the Flying Universities of Poland, it would be an affront to the politics and economics of authority. It may well be the case that for decades, or generations, the university of the future will consist only in a guild of wandering scholars, patiently waiting for a time when it is possible to recreate residential campuses. If it is possible to establish campuses, they would need to acknowledge and plan for their own fragility and vulnerability. We must imagine for a world in which rapid shifts in the environment, such as the desertification that overwhelmed Khotan a thousand years ago, are no longer exceptional events. Monumental architecture is out: we must imagine a light, mobile, reconfigurable university that can settle in a place for decades or centuries, but be ready to shift as ecologies, politics or populations require.

This points us again to the ideal of the monastic university, and in particular to the figure of the itinerant scholar-renunciant. Buddhist nuns and monks were welcome in the caravans that spun the earliest trade networks of Asia both because they acted as trust brokers between distant commercial centres, and because they were immediately useful: they were doctors, scholars, storytellers, and ritualists all in one handy person. In our university of the future, we should require our professors to be practically skilled in medicine, ecology and technology—welcome where ever they arrive, because they know how to fix a generator, how to plan irrigation, how to mend a broken limb.

Our libraries, then, will of necessity be portable. We do not yet have any information storage technology that is as durable as vellum, paper or palm leaf, and constructing a library for this university will require inventing technologies that allow for physically very stable, networkable, distributed storage which is small, has minimal energy costs and affords easy retrieval of information across a wide range of low demand platforms. So, too, this guild and their universities—for clearly it is a mobile, adaptable network of clusters—will require excellent communication. Extrapolating from present changes, it is very likely that world transport will become a slow, low-intensity process with very rare exceptions. Even if global elites insist on using high-input, high-damage travel in the next decades, this is fundamentally unsustainable. Our guild of scholars will travel lightly, staying to found or teach at a university for years, communicating constantly in order to undertake and share research, examine students, teach remote classes, and co-ordinate the work of the guild.

Under such circumstances, how can we imagine undertaking complex research projects? For example (and these are deliberately provocative examples) developing sustainable energy production and distribution systems such as fusion reactors and massive batteries, rescuing endangered species using techniques of genetic mapping and cloning, developing new medicines, mapping rapidly changing ecosystems, detecting intelligent life on other planets, or developing biological processes for digesting plastic waste and sewage efficiently all require substantial investments of money and equipment. The only possible answer here is to plan for light-touch research where possible, and accept co-operation with industrial partners and governments where necessary. Even if there is widespread collapse of

infrastructure and economies, present-day elites have a great deal invested in preserving their ability to extract petrochemicals, manufacture weapons, and so on. Just as I am writing this document, so too strategists at Cargill, General Electric, and Swiss Re—and indeed also various authoritarian governments—are busy planning for the long-term survival of their industries and empires in the face of environmental disaster, economic upheaval, and rapid social change (see, for example: Swiss Re Institute 2020).

From where we stand, we can see that the environment is changing disastrously: more quickly, and more severely, than we anticipated even five years ago. If, as scholars, we care about the capacity of scholarship to help all living beings, then we must initiate a radical transformation of the university. I do not imagine that many—perhaps most—academics and scholars who read this will be convinced either of the urgency, or of the depth, of the changes required. Nonetheless it is my humble proposal that we must abandon the university as we presently have it: it cannot respond to the present crisis as it is too tightly connected to the causes of that crisis either to see the problems or to solve them. If, as scholars, we value wisdom and compassion towards all sentient beings as our guiding virtues, then we must imagine a wholly new, humbler guild of scholars and universities of the future that are dedicated to healing the planet and finding ways for humans to inhabit the earth as symbionts together with all other life.

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