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Critical thinking, university autonomy, and societal evolution; thoughts on a research agenda

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Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction	2
The societal heritage.....	3
The evolving of philosophical systems.....	5
Societal evolution under growing complexity	7
Examples of critical thinking.....	9
The re-shaping of Confucianism.....	9
Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation	9
Ogyu Sorai and a Confucianism for Japan.....	10
Re-thinking the HE–society interface.....	11
What is changing?.....	12
Modernisation 2.....	12
The challenges of Modernisation 2.....	13
What does Modernisation 2 do that matters?	14
Institutionalising critical thinking.....	15
Acknowledgements.....	18
References	19

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Abstract

Societies appear to progress to modern levels of economic and social quality to the extent that they are able to foster within people high capacities to think for themselves, to reach informed judgments and to persuade others. At the political level there is also a need to hold the society together while at the same time adjusting its workings to allow for evolutionary change. This entails a balancing act in which at times of change there are tensions to be resolved, or lived with. One such tension is the current one between fostering critical thinking and responding to pragmatic logics such as those of the labour and finance markets. The capacity to manage such stresses may be shaped by the society's cultural and civilizational heritage. Although *homo sapiens* have evolved with high levels of consciousness and intentionality, these come to be enacted differently between societies, leaving some societies more prone to conformism under certain precipitating conditions. It has been the traditional role of HE to assist societies in such transformations. This entails transferring the heritage, while re-interpreting it, so as to enhance two societal capacities needed for stable continued evolution: innovativeness and cooperativeness. For this task universities need high levels of autonomy, or 'actorhood', so as to be able to counter the pressures from competing external interests. This provides a basis, as conceived by Whitley, for comparing universities and their societal contexts.

Introduction

This paper explores the present-day consequences of Kant's dictum that societies progress by liberating individuals from high dependence on others as sources of *thinking*, although such others are still people to learn from. Such learning should include the encouragement of that thinking. The implication is that the more a society contains individuals who can think for themselves, so as to reach informed judgments and persuade others of them, the greater is the society's capacity to handle the difficult work of adjusting to changing and increasing complexity. This capability, if acquired, takes on board the challenges of (a) holding the society together while (b) adjusting its workings.

The question of *critical thinking* has long been part of the theorising of policy in higher education. Today it has returned to centre stage at the interface between two major forces affecting current practice. On the one hand are the wishes of many educationists and employers to foster in students a capacity to think for themselves.

This includes them using their own judgment in absorbing what they might first encounter as received wisdom. It also includes them expressing their own informed positions convincingly. Counterbalancing this is a renewed momentum in much HE practice to attend more to the teaching of pragmatic knowledge and techniques for use in employment. In this latter adjustment the concerns of many governments with labour-market efficiency, and with employers for reliably certified skills, have come to the fore under the competitive pressures of globalisation.

The encouragement of thinking and the acquiring of know-how are not seen here as incompatible. At a fundamental level they are not opposed. Human capital and social capital are reciprocal and it is reasonable to assume that they can cross-fertilise each other; if, that is, the surrounding controlling influences are in tune with such an ideal.

The debates over approaches such as problem-based learning, or the innovations surrounding MOOCs and flipped classrooms, display the experimental nature of such intended cross-fertilisation. But the pragmatic forces of managerialism, and of market prioritising, may lead to bias in HE institutional processes and priorities. Less attention than is due may be given to the competencies surrounding independent, but informed and responsible, thinking and creative expression. How critical thinking can be stimulated within practical 'training' is still a field of interesting trials and techniques, but – with striking exceptions – it is not a widely implanted core feature of educational practice, despite its common use as a mantra.

Lying as background behind experiments with the transfers of understanding between teachers and students is the issue of the amount of discretion that can be assumed by teachers, not just over how teaching should be conducted, but over

what should be taught. This latter issue is then framed within the much wider question of why? And how that is answered. And who can answer it.

The societal heritage

There is a school of thought that sees such dilemmas as affected by societal ideals stemming from the civilizational heritage. In crude terms some heritages are seen as fostering conformism rather than autonomous informed judgment. Such a heritage may not belong to a single nation-state, but may be an expression of guidelines stemming from either ancient codes of social behavior prior to the forming of states, and/or to social ideals codified on the basis of the axial religions. There is much evidence to support such a conclusion, as decades of the World Values Surveys show (Welzel 2013, Norris and Inglehart 2004) but it may be more progressive to move on from such findings and ask whether they are non-negotiable; to suggest also the probably crucial role of education in any adjustments to such fatalism. As Peter Berger once observed: culture is not an ancient curse.

In such an enquiry it would be useful to study first how philosophical systems evolve. Do some of them stop evolving and so become frozen in time as well as place? If not, and if therefore their evolution is a normal part of human progress, it is then worth analysing the potential role of education in such a progression. A prime assumption would be that the main philosophical systems have been equivalent to each other in their ultimate worth. They are also usually products of the societies in which they have been embedded. Any such philosophy might also be seen as carried into other societies and retained there by a minority, as with versions of Islam in Europe, or in diasporas such as the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, or the Lebanese in the Middle East. Such systems of ideas do not *necessarily* travel well between societies. The question is whether philosophical systems *all* carry within them the capacity to evolve, and if so, how that capacity shows itself.

A key idea from evolutionary theory is adopted here, and is expressed by economic historian Douglass North (2005) in terms of the combination of *consciousness* and *intentionality*. Put simply, its version in the context of this paper would be proposed as follows. The human species has evolved to dominate the planet by virtue of a uniquely acquired capability for consciousness enhanced by language, for formulating and acting upon intentions, and for cooperation in the interest of group survival. These characteristics are associated with unusual (compared to other species) growth of the brain, then allowing accumulation via language of the learning and knowledge storage needed in the application of the capabilities. Brain expansion is traceable to the control of fire, and then of cooking, and allowed the body to evolve and escape from high dependence on chewed raw vegetation (Wrangam 2010). Adaptation then proceeded and continues, and territorial command expanded and remains in play.

It is then possible to argue that a social group will survive and flourish depending on its interpretation and expression of the same core mental instincts. In other words when a surrounding environment needs to be adapted to, in the interests of group survival, the species has evolved to facilitate group versions of consciousness and intentionality. Using this, the changing circumstances are subjected to analysis, debate, and conclusion, and new intentions are formulated so as to increase the likelihood of everyone surviving and flourishing.

Moving up from the survival group scale to that of large society, the same principles remain valid. Even the very large human group, if it is to continue flourishing, must encourage within it the exercise of consciousness, and the correct reading of relevant surrounding change. Critical thinking in institutionalised education is an expression of that consciousness and the reflexivity that goes with it. Academic freedom is the main expression of openness to understanding relevant external change. At the heart of any such process in most societies is the institution of the university, whose function is to facilitate these processes of continued human and societal evolution. When a society loses either of these adaptations – to analyse change and to act in response – it begins to run against the logics of evolution and to suffer stasis, and possibly entropy. Needed adjustments might include internal structures for cooperation as well as externally-oriented action.

The matters that humans evolved to explain (consciousness) and act upon (intentionality) did not necessarily relate only to the mystery of external surroundings and threats. They would also include the understanding of nature interacted with directly, and so would evolve into forms of natural and social science, and philosophising about cosmology.

In exploring such issues here much guidance has been derived from Randall Collins' major study of the sociology of philosophies (Collins 1998). Important too for the work of comparison have been insights from G R Lloyd's (1996) study of Greek and Chinese science, contrasting 'adversarial' and 'authoritarian' societies and subsequently different ways of conducting scientific discourse. Joseph Needham's (1956) deep studies on Chinese science and his posing of 'the Needham question' (Why did Chinese science slow down?) have been a significant stimulus. Recent studies in the sociology of science, by Richard Whitley and others, pointing to the strategic nature of intellectual autonomy among academics, could also be drawn upon (Whitley 2012, Whitley, Glaser and Engwall 2010, Glaser and Whitley 2014). The parallel socio-economics literature on the comparison of systems of capitalism, and inclusion within that of the issue of underlying rationales (Redding 2005) has been instructive. A conclusion will be that a society's ideology supports its political and institutional contexts and in turn serves to shape how knowledge and understanding are acquired and used. This means that, given systems thinking, the education system is in turn capable potentially of reciprocally shaping those societies. The questions for higher education theory would be whether, why, and how.

Certain universals in how philosophies ‘work’ will be visible to permit a view that no one such system has a claim on ultimate precedence for the pursuit of human happiness. But at the same time some systems foster what Collins terms ‘Rapid-Discovery Science’. The evidence is strong that such a capability is key to the fostering of modern levels of wealth per capita, and of ‘developed’ conditions of human life (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, Fukuyama 2011, Gellner 1992, Heilbroner 1985, Jones 1981, Landes 1998, Mokyr 2009, Schluchter 1981).

If internal adaptation of societal rationales in the interest of stable societal progress is seen to be a part of that evolution, then agendas might be set for a review of the philosophy-society interface, so that internal adaptation might allow retention of the society’s core civilizational ideals, while at the same time fostering critical thinking. The idea that societies go through ‘phase transitions’ (Ball 2004) as major influences press them to adjust, is relevant and perhaps urgent today, under the information revolution. In this web of processes the role of education is clearly significant. On the surface above such subterranean shifts would be the indicator of informed and expressed intellectual autonomy.

The evolving of philosophical systems

A society’s philosophy is usually shaped by foundational writers whose work is then adopted by others and perhaps re-interpreted in an evolving process that – at any period of new consensus building – could be termed a coalition of minds. Typical originators would be Confucius in China, Mohamed in the Moslem world, Plato or St Paul in Europe. Major re-interpretation proceeds in networks. The cluster of writers surrounding Mencius, the Enlightenment scholars, and the followers of Luther all re-thought and updated the foundational ideas, and caused substantial shifts in how societies were persuaded to think about their rules of conduct. Such re-thinking coincided with surrounding societal shifts in arenas of practice, and of communications, of the kind now accumulating and penetrating today.

Intellectual communities, acting as networks of scholars, tend to achieve a combined force for progress by deeper and deeper reflection. As Collins (1998:787) puts it ‘The long-term tendency of an active intellectual community is to raise the level of abstraction and reflexivity’. There are many significant examples of such re-thinking today in the field of higher education theory, such as Nussbaum’s (2010) defence of the humanities, Barnett’s (2011) call for a re-defining of the university role, and the call by Palfreyman and Tapper (2014) for the ‘re-shaping’ of UK universities. As to progress in abstraction recent examples are Scott’s (2015) call for a new vocabulary with which to wrestle mentally with the changing HE world, and Morley’s (2012) call for new vocabularies ‘to challenge the archaism and hyperactivity that frame the sector’. Such re-thinking would challenge the received wisdom by re-setting its interpretation. It may have long-lasting impact, as did Ogyu Sorai in his re-forming of much Confucian theorising in Tokugawa Japan (see later), something seen as underlying the consequent separating out of Japanese and Chinese societies from

each other, and in Japan having the world's overall best educated population at the mid-nineteenth century (Eisenstadt 1996).

Such reflexivity, when timed to coincide with changes in the material base, can shape new societal responses, as occurred with the various European Enlightenment initiatives, stemming from different coalitions of thinkers, that shaped the subtle differences between societies as they emerged in the Industrial Revolution (Himmelfarb 2004).

Collins shows the historical *repeating of certain patterns* in the social production of ideas that influence a society's values, norms, and institutions. Philosophical work moves forward by being conducted over networks of scholars. Such *networks* follow 'the law of small numbers' so that the influential clusters remain fairly small, with membership typically between 10 and 20. Because of the plural clusterings of small numbers there is a resulting capacity for *variety* across the overall scene and for resulting contest and competition. Such *disputation* may not last, and may carry risks for its practitioners, but can be highly stimulating in certain periods.

Also, and crucially, there are likely to be *precipitating conditions* that shape the processes and results of philosophising. Taking classical Greece and ancient China as cases illustrating this, Collins (1998: 147) argues that Chinese philosophy has more or less always directed its appeal at an authoritarian regime struggling to pull together an immense society. Physical conditions, and especially the high dependence on water control supported the centralisation of power (Wittfogel 1957, Ball 2016), and so too did ecological conditions over earlier prehistory shape different societal responses to power and to the use of knowledge (Welzel 2013). In contrast to China, in classical Greece, where city-states were 'easier' to manage, 'religious legitimation of the state was never a grand issue...ethical issues in Greek philosophy hinge almost entirely on the actions of the individual'.

This important difference has been carried forward through history and remains significant today. It is, for instance, arguable that the societal philosophy now emerging in China, after the breakdown of Mao's version of communism followed by a series of twists and turns, returns to the foundational ideals of Confucius about the role of the state. This has always meant an emperor figure backed by an administrative elite controlling role behavior, leading to widespread public order and stability. Now we see an updated version of the patrimonialism lying at the heart of China's society for millennia. By contrast, the varied philosophies of the western European states contain within them the same intention to coordinate order, but via a focus on the individual, via democracy and freedom to think, as did classical Greece. A question for this paper is whether the arguably consequent variations in conformity lie unacknowledged as a policy issue in a cosmopolitan classroom.

Societal evolution under growing complexity

Evolutionary theory is now expanding fast under the stimulus of historical DNA analysis. Here are visible the phase transitions that move societies to new levels of capacity to handle complexity, as occurred under the agricultural revolution, urbanisation, and the industrial revolution. Today, pressure on societies to evolve appropriately comes from a quantum leap in the complexity and variety that societies have to absorb and master. 'Appropriate' here means capable of maintaining stability while improving quality of life. Theories about both complexity and evolution have themselves expanded rapidly as information technology has fed them with new stimuli and intellectual resources. So too the demands from the world of economic practice, and of politics, have justified new thinking (e.g. Nicolis and Prigogine 1989, Kauffman 1995, Beinhocker 2007, Mc Closkey 2010, Sennett 1998).

As evolutionary studies are still evolving, early stage generalising needs to remain cautious. There is, however, support for the following outline propositions:

1. There has been an explosion in the amount of data available to people, but a lag in conversion to available information, and an even greater lag in conversion to understanding. There is, therefore, a growing amount of slack for interpretation, and a variety of societal responses to handling the new streams of data (Boisot 1995). New among these is re-thinking via the internet as with the rages seen on Twitter, or more benignly the growth of crowd-funding for worthy causes.
2. Nevertheless in certain fields, for example medicine, industrial process engineering, global communications, administrative integration, a new force for the coordination of human activities has been released through IT. A clear example is global cooperation in cancer research.
3. The way in which this force comes to be energised into practical application is still strongly affected by societal contexts, and particularly by the ways in which information comes to be codified and diffused within a society, and by variations in access to, and competencies with, IT.
4. Much of the codification and diffusion is initiated within a society's education system.
5. Societies evolve as complex adaptive systems competing to survive better than others. This entails (a) the judicious reading of change so as to sense how to respond, and (b) the capacity to engage societal members in any necessary adaptation (Turner and Maryanski 2008, Sen 2006).
6. In practice this boils down to the accumulating within a society of two capacities: *adaptiveness* and *cooperativeness*. These capacities are reciprocal and the balancing of their expression is a high political art, rarely achieved without intermittent periods of stress (Holland 1995, Teece 2009, Nowak 2011, Ostrom 1990, Pagel 2012, Seabright 2010, Sennett 2012).
7. *Adaptiveness* entails usually a combination of loose-tight properties, but rests essentially on the empowerment of individuals to express their own intellectual curiosity without duress, and to practice innovation in encouraging

conditions, so that the proliferation of a variety of responses to societal challenges is fostered. This pluralism, and within it the competition for approval in free conditions of choice, is then the most natural guarantee of appropriateness in subsequent adjustments. The initial key to successful societal evolution is the 'right' reading of surrounding change prior to adaptation. This, in simple terms, is the role of research and its applications, and the rationale for scholarship. The dissemination of it is the role of education. Much of the practice of it is innovation. It is the job of universities especially to guard and enhance a society's capacity to adjust itself to changing times without losing its integrity.

8. *Cooperativeness* has two axes: vertical and horizontal. The vertical is about the legitimacy of the authority structure, and whether the philosophy underlying that legitimacy is capable of fostering high trust in the authority system. This needs to be enough to encourage adventurousness at the base sufficient to contribute to the adaptiveness. The totalitarian state does not normally pass this test. The normally successful form is one where all members are subject to the same legal constraints, and where the society is open. The second axis of cooperativeness is horizontal, and this is about the capacity to trust strangers. Without this, all exchange processes are subject to the limits of interpersonal trust-bonding and are consequently stifled when it comes to extending exchange more widely. Key here is system trust via institutions; e.g. a society's system of law and regulation, and the trust in that system's fairness; and the building of a sense of civic consciousness which psychologically enhances the concern to share public goods responsibly.
9. The work of a system of education is essentially to transfer a society's civilizational beliefs and norms between generations (Konner 2010, Black 2014, Higton 2012,). But it also contains the duty to constantly re-assess the appropriateness of those civilizational beliefs and to adjust them to meet the realities of a changing world, in the interests of a society's capacity to survive as a functioning social system. A failed state is one in which that test has not been met. Such constant re-interpreting and reformulating is the work of research and it feeds into the wider consciousness through teaching.
10. Education is charged with maintaining societal co-operativeness as much as it is charged with maintaining innovativeness. This entails giving attention to the less visible issues of societal ideals and citizenship, and responsibility towards 'public goods', without which the co-operativeness will break down, and the society's evolutionary capacity to survive will be threatened.

Adaptation at both the philosophical and practical levels will always rest on critical thinking, as the following examples illustrate.

Examples of critical thinking

The re-shaping of Confucianism

After the founding contribution of Confucius (551-479 BCE) the periods of 'high-density' philosophising in Chinese history have been identified by Collins (1998: 58) as follows: (a) in the late Warring States period 365-235 BCE, over four generations there was a flowering of new thinking that divided into separate schools. The work of Confucius was expanded by Mencius; Taoism brought forward ancient naturalistic ideals of syncretic *yin-yang* balancing of forces; and the Mohist *Canons* provided 'the high point of rationalistic logic in all Chinese history'. The distinctively blended nature of Chinese philosophising about society was then stabilised in the flowering of Han civilization for the four hundred years after 200 BCE. (b) The second great flowering coincided with the Sung dynasty and lasted a century and a half from 1035 CE. It is labeled Neo-Confucianism and its workings are summarised by Collins (1998: 299) as follows:

Neo-Confucianism was in large measure a reactionary movement; its creative energy in philosophy came from its oppositional stance in the political conflicts of the time. In some respects the Neo-Confucians were radical innovators: in overturning the traditional Confucian stance on religion, as well as in their participation in the scientific empiricism of the time. The creativity of Neo-Confucian philosophy was a process of manoeuvring in the cultural space opened up through the multi-sided institutional transformations of Sung society.

It is this period of re-thinking that led, among many other things, to the great flowering of the Sung dynasties (960-1279 CE). One example is the principle of open (as opposed to elite) national examinations to find the best talent for public administration. Over the years of the dynasty the number of those examined annually grew from 5,000 to 400,000. The idea of an intellectual elite bureaucracy was widely adopted by other countries and remains a central Chinese ideal, despite the Maoist attempt to destroy it and replace it with a pale replica.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

In 1517 CE, Martin Luther broke new ground in several fields. Known well for his attack on the Catholic Church profiteering through the sale of indulgences, he also had much influence through his writings and sermons on human relations, marriage, and race relations. This societal concern expanded into critiques of the workings of the economy such as usury, distributive justice, charity, with many such concerns remaining valid today (Rossner 2015). The series of Reformations that followed helped to shape several societies in flux over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Reformation itself was further 'reformed' under Calvin who attacked the Catholic assumptions of what was to be taken as sacred, and redefined the

relations between God and humanity, and so between Church and State. The consequent disenchantment of the world and the separation of reason from faith is considered by many to have contributed to the secularisation of the West and to the industrial revolutions (Gellner 1992).

Ogyu Sorai and a Confucianism for Japan

In his study of Japanese civilization, Schmucl Eisenstadt pays tribute to the influence of Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728 CE) and the school of his followers, for their influence on re-interpreting Confucianism in a way that was more relevant to Japan. Tokugawa, on uniting Japan after 1601, had embraced the Confucian ethic and system of order as a principal means of stabilising the nation, but it took this new school to adjust its application to earlier Japanese traditions and social structures. Two features of this change are noteworthy.

Firstly, Japan had evolved over the preceding millenium without a single dominant emperor figure, but instead with a symbolic unifying emperor shorn of direct political power, alongside a powerful series of contenders for political and practical dominance. With central power divided, this meant that the role of emperor could not match that in China, where emperors always had unchallenged authority for the worldly interpretation of the principles of heavenly order.

Secondly, and in consequence of the divided centre, order became heavily influenced by earlier Japanese traditions of community, so as to create what Eisenstadt (1996), acknowledging Murakami (1984), termed an *ie* civilization, meaning community-based. In this the family took second place to the community. So a form of Confucianism took hold that was a blend of Chinese and Japanese social ideals. It underpinned the long peace and prosperity of the Tokugawa shogunate up to 1868, and, in a modern form, is still arguably visible in much of Japanese social behavior.

In these brief anecdotes a consistent theme is that each society had arrived at a period of necessary major transformation. The old rules of the game had changed. Luther was a catalyst in breaking the overpowering dominance of the Catholic Church and ushering in a new understanding of the nature of authority. The Neo-Confucians in China overturned the traditional Confucian stance on religion and changed rationally the basis for power. Ogyu Sorai took Japan into a new social structure that was compatible with its old traditions. These three great re-designs responded to surrounding changes in large-scale power: new nation-states contending with the Pope; a new dynasty re-uniting China after much destruction; and a new Shogun re-uniting Japan after centuries of conflict.

In later transformations such as eighteenth century European Enlightenment, nineteenth century Marxism, the Meiji Restoration, twentieth century colonialism and world conflicts, other groups of thinkers would re-shape societies dramatically. Trajectories of successful stability would emerge as exemplars, but be hard to apply

widely. Some failed. The rule of appropriateness to societal cultures would still apply to provide challenge in the transfers of originally quite embedded systems.

If that set of circumstances is made even more challenging by the quantum leap in complexity brought by (a) the IT revolution (b) globalisation and (c) a new form of modernity, then the importance of intellectual and societal adaptability to meet the challenge rises also.

Re-thinking the HE–society interface

The questions now for education theorists are: What major surrounding shifts are threatening the current unsteady societal equilibria? How is a specific society so affected? Both questions apply to two issues: What is changing that matters for societal cohesion and progress? And what are the implications of that for the practice of HE? For each issue: What critical thinking is now needed in response? If societies need to be enhanced with appropriate capacities for adaptiveness and cooperativeness, how may that be achieved (society by society) in a changing world. There is evidence that this question has been so far inadequately dealt with, that perhaps the challenges of globalisation and the information revolution are too recent and too overwhelming in their impact for scholars or practitioners to have had time yet to grapple with them critically.

In this scenario, an assumption is that it will take major thinkers to point the way; and the encouragement of major thinking is one of the roles of a university. Can universities fill such a role? Is their current pattern of adjustment strengthening or weakening their collective capacity to do society's thinking for it? The weakness of theorising about higher education's evolution is regularly commented on, for instance by Ronald Barnett (2013:9,11) who writes:

imaginative and even utopian thinking is – I shall suggest – rather thin on the ground, and unless it is more in evidence, Higher Education as a social institution is liable to be somewhat rudderless, and will be subject to the buffeting of large global forces.

Barnett additionally raises the issue of universities becoming hollowed out, i.e. deprived of their ability to take action they consider appropriate, a metaphor to be considered later in this paper. Robert Cowen, reviewing the literature on the link between HE and societal development, suggests that 'the theme is under-theorised in the literature of comparative education, even though the descriptive literature is large' (Cowen 2006: 25). Simon Marginson (2014: 53) poses clearly another of the central questions, that of societal cooperativeness, in discussing how education influences the consciousness of 'public goods': 'How do we maintain and reproduce the collective human environment that is essential to our existence?'

Martha Nussbaum's (2010, 142) defence of the humanities concludes with this disturbing vision:

Nations of technically trained people who do not know how to criticize authority, useful profit makers with obtuse imaginations... a suicide of the soul...as greed and narcissism contend against respect and love, all modern societies are losing the battle as they feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect.

What is changing?

What is changing that matters? To consider this question I turn now to the idea of a second form of modernisation now emerging to perhaps replace the earlier optimistic and expansive form that has underpinned the industrial revolution and the subsequent ascendancy of free-market democratic structures. The new form is referred to as Modernisation 2.

Modernisation 2

The account that follows owes much to the work of Ulrich Beck and Antony Giddens and a cluster of fellow scholars (Sennett 1998, Latour 2012, Beck and Grande 2010, Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994, Calhoun 2010, Yan 2009, Han and Shim 2010, Mahoraj 2010, Suzuki et al 2010). The question is discussed here at an introductory level only. Attention will be paid, at least in outline, to the implications for HE theory.

The core position taken is that mainstream social theories are now out of date because a second form of modernisation is taking shape in practice, while theory and guidance are running behind. This change stems from a more entangled and more cosmopolitan form of modernity driven by the globalisation of capital, of exchange, of risk, and of communications. The unintended consequences in many modern societies include disturbance to old stabilities such as the career, welfare provision, employment, acceptable inequality, social tolerance, public goods. What Calhoun (2010) terms 'the biographical internalisation of systemic risks' goes with the institutionalised disembedding and re-embedding of the individual, and the compulsory assignment of self-responsibility. Such 'individualisation' is not the same as the 'individualism' widely seen in cultural comparisons. It is instead a weaning away from dependence, and away from the societal traditions that had previously made such dependence part of moral reciprocities. It is enforced by new market logics and some form of sense is made of it via cosmopolitan influences on shared thinking.

The rise in cosmopolitanism is seen as undermining national boundaries with new interconnections, and new identities, an example of which is the transnational marriage, now in Europe running at an average of 20 per cent, with 30 per cent in

some countries (IUSSP 2011). It is exacerbated by what demographers see as the greatest series of migrations in human history (Hatton and Williamson 2008), as the magnetic attraction of prosperous states grows with increasing gaps in national per capita wealth, with the potent appeal of employment, of institutionalised welfare, and with the visibility of democratic deficits.

Mahoraj describes the 'really existing cosmopolitanism' as 'a rough and ready quotidian connectivity'; an impure *realpolitik*; a set of humdrum global links forged daily 'above and beyond the container of national space'. This multiple micro reality contrasts with its 'elusive utopian counterpart' and is 'the small change of the universal'. He questions whether the globalisation phenomenon has enough legitimacy to allow it to counteract the more divisive forces that come with it to threaten the integrity of more traditionally defined societies. If traditionally defined societies are crumbling, then so too is their civilizational heritage under threat. Education then might become a main bulwark against that trend, assuming it guards itself against chauvinism.

A society in which to ask such questions is Japan, where two decades of relative stagnation have undermined much social structure. Globalisation and neoliberalism are considered by many to have brought an end to Japan's first form of modernisation (Suzuki et al 2010). In the earlier form two main features were (a) the guaranteeing by private corporations of long term stability for employees and families, and (b) the use of a large guiding bureaucracy. Both of these forces have been undermined by globalisation and neoliberal policies. The outcome is that 'the presence of intermediate groups that tolerate dependence is merely an aspect of a vanished past'. The current end-result is rising tension between the liberating freeing up of choice for individuals, and the security of employment of the earlier tradition. Many individuals thrown into the arena of a global risk-based society find themselves exposed and unprotected. Japan's 20-year economic malaise may, at least in part, be due to the consequent loss of societal cohesion in a society where that had earlier been particularly high. This illustrates the dilemma of maintaining cooperativeness noted earlier.

The challenges of Modernisation 2

The essential threat from Modernisation 2 is the loosening of control by the nation-state over affairs within it. A consequence is the slow loss of national distinctiveness, as the loss of a monopoly over standards-setting weakens state authority. For instance in HE, *global* rankings redefine many parameters of university management. *Foreign*-student fees re-shape university finances. *New clientele groupings* bring a shift in patterns of power. *New rules* emerge for competition. *New transnational* alliances form. This is not to downplay the benefits of globalisation, but instead to suggest a need to probe into its side-effects in HE. The matter is obviously highly complex, as there are many unintended consequences.

The concern in this paper is with the uses of HE in serving the needs of societies to adapt and innovate in such ways that enhance their progress as viable long-term units of social survival. For such analysis, the dilemmas now coming to the surface need to be identified and their natures understood. It may then be possible to identify some principles to guide policies of response.

It is important here to make a distinction between (a) finding specific modes of societal action to espouse, and (b) finding a way of constantly fine-tuning and adjusting a particular society's modes of action. It is the second of these two that matters most (both for society and for HE), because without the openness of thinking in (b), the best actions in (a) may never be found. Because of that the conclusion, in preview, will be that the autonomy of scholars becomes the centre-piece of any effective adjustment, but that such autonomy will need to be earned by the relevance of its use in the larger arena. Managerialism in parallel can be held to the same account. In the end the identifying of the criteria applied to judge the societal adjustments becomes the crux of the matter, and, if this is to 'work', it will need somehow to express a society's civilizational ideals.

What does Modernisation 2 do that matters?

Lipovetsky (2005) has suggested that the 'hypermodernisation' of the university is visible in the following changes: cross-institutional collaboration; the blurring of the public/private distinction; new modes of learning; pursuit of impact in the new knowledge economy; the rise of global forces; academic nomadism.

In another review of thinking on the idea of the university in the twenty-first century, Diaz Villa (2012) suggests a high level of uncertainty in the face of surrounding change. In rationally responding to such change, universities have tended to adjust many of their features and components: their boundaries, what they have newly incorporated, and the defining of their internal elements, have all been fields of historically rapid evolution. In this the principle of rationality towards order and control has remained a central guide, as they seek to continue legitimating their specific fields of knowledge. But the rationality that is intended to bring order is a double-edged sword, because (citing Welsch 1998, 18) 'Disorder is an inevitable consequence of the modern development of rationality, characterised by pluralisation and entanglements'. A reflection of this is visible in the growth of specialisation. This seemingly remains the right response to proliferating variety in social systems, but brings with it the inevitable challenges of maintaining integration. Except that now many more and different environments are being served, and bring demands.

In such a scenario, it is perhaps worth standing back and taking stock of some fundamentals. They boil down to two questions: are the responses of societies in protecting their long-term viability based on a reading of the most significant surrounding changes? Does a society have the right quantity and quality of reflexive thinkers working to find appropriate adjustments?

Subsidiary questions would then flow from these: In reading change, is attention paid to both threats and opportunities? In re-shaping society is enough attention paid to the retention of its cohesion? What may be brought forward from the civilizational heritage that could be protected by re-affirmation or re-interpretation? How might new ideals be legitimated? How might the work of higher education be coordinated with other societal fields of response, especially those in the economy and in politics?

Institutionalising critical thinking

Societies evolve by solving two problems: they adjust beneficially to changing threats and opportunities; and they find ways of staying integrated and internally cooperative (Durkheim 1984, Ridley 1996). If either of these features is weakened, they are in danger of stasis or decline. As complexity rises, the re-thinking needed to maintain progress becomes more challenging. And such thinking will be historically path-dependent, society by society. The main arena in which such re-thinking takes place in practice is that where philosophy and science flow together. It might be called the 'world of learning' and it has loose boundaries, encompassing individual thinkers like Montaigne, or St Augustin, or Marx, economic practitioners such as Steve Jobs, Thomas Edison, or Kiichiro Toyoda, or politicians such as Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Ghandi or Margaret Thatcher. But the testing ground and main field for the expression of new thinking, reflexivity, argument, and the codifying of forward movement, is that of universities. In most societies they are designed for that purpose and they may become surrounded by related offshoots in think-tanks, laboratories and research centres.

The question now is whether, under the pressures of Modernisation 2, the core HE institutions are losing their effectiveness in carrying out the remit. A parallel question for some societies is whether they were actually designed for that purpose, or whether that intent has been replaced. In considering this, and returning to the central role of critical thinking, the focus of this paper now shifts to the question of the amount of autonomy available to academics. The assumption is that on this will rest a society's capacity to respond effectively to change and complexity, and the form of that response.

The issue of academic autonomy as a defining feature of university capability has been addressed by Richard Whitley (2012) in a proposal that university 'actorhood' be seen as a societally influenced characteristic. Such actorhood means being 'fully-fledged' and 'complete' organisations. More specifically:

These stem from the highly uncertain nature of scientific research undertaken to contribute to collective intellectual goals through publication of new knowledge together with the dominant role of scientific communities in deciding which problems are worth studying, how they should be formulated and how possible solutions are evaluated (495).

Pointing out the current context of this issue, and basing his commentary on studies across the OECD countries of research-oriented universities, Whitley argues that the planning and coordinating of research projects, and the judgment of the research and teaching that flows from them, are ill-suited to managers outside the relevant field. There are serious problems of comparability and standardisation that hinder cross-disciplinary comparison. The organisation of elite labour markets varies by society and is often influenced politically. So too do the interconnections between the state, the business sector, and the universities, vary greatly. So universities become 'arenas for competing external interests', and struggle to protect their actorhood, in other words their academic freedom.

As Whitley (1996) suggests, in current conditions 'it is very difficult, if not indeed impossible, for universities to become complete organisations'. Their actorhood is under pressure from the rise of new constituencies and institutions designed in societies trying to cope with proliferating complexity and rising costs. In such conditions there is no obvious benefit in resorting to old models of university autonomy designed in an earlier age, but there is benefit in understanding the risks of lost autonomy in current conditions, as the retention of an adequate amount of it remains critical for societal adaptability. It is an empirical question, of great complexity, as to how much a university with high actorhood contributes to societal progress but it is discernible as an article of faith in most of the literature expressing concern at present trends (e.g. Barnett 2012).

To that end Whitley proposes a framework in which universities might be classified according to their degree of organisational actorhood, in other words their capacity to fill themselves with empowered and active scholars. In its negative form this means being empty of such potential initiative, or 'hollow'. The assigning of their status would be based on four criteria:

1. Degree of strategic autonomy: based on

- a) being able to determine which activities will be undertaken for what purposes,
- b) ability to obtain particular human and material resources as a distinct organisation,
- c) being able to determine the nature of their relationships with other organisations and social actors, especially the state.

2. Staff recruitment: capacity to control the conditions under which academic staff are recruited, assessed and rewarded.

3. Student intake: capacity to control the terms on which students are admitted, the nature of educational programs provided, and how their competences are assessed and certified.

4. Managerial capabilities: discretion to allocate resources, and to coordinate different activities, knowledge and skills around organisational policies and procedures.

Using this framework, four ideal types are suggested: hollow, state-contracted, state-chartered, and private-portfolio. The theory proposes both proximate and background conditions that affect the evolution of the ideal types. Within the background conditions the primary feature is the relationship between universities and the state. Drawing on parallel studies of comparative business systems, on which there is now a large body of knowledge, it is clear that ‘societies differ considerably in the extent to which states coordinate and control social and economic activities and take responsibility for outcomes, as distinct from preferring to delegate both powers and responsibilities to semi-autonomous agents’ (506).

As a contribution to the further evolving of theories of comparative HE, this paper suggests the adoption of a method of comparative analysis comprehensive enough to match those now in use for the comparison of business systems (see e.g. Whitley 2002, Witt and Redding 2014) and inclusive enough to factor in the societal philosophies that have a bearing on critical thinking. The purpose of this paper is to bring forward for attention the role in these processes of what Whitley terms the ‘developmental ideologies’ that – along with many other factors – shape the institutional fabric of any state. Such ideologies are seen here as the foundations of the political response and the means of legitimising the state power structure. They are matched in comparative business systems theory by the inclusion of the factor of ‘rationale’ and of key historical legacies (Redding and Witt 2015).

Returning now to the question of how universities contribute to a society’s capacity to evolve and remain stable under Modernisation 2, I return to the question of critical thinking, and to the advocacy of new initiatives to stimulate that. As Barnett (2011) has advocated, the university in these changing circumstances needs to enhance its capacity to adapt by going beyond previous reimits. In this it should become more sensitive to its contexts and to its interactions with them. The issue may be seen at both individual and societal levels.

For individuals, Barnett asks:

Is their learning such that they are developing powers of self-criticality, and powers of imaginative creative thought such that they are likely to be self-sustaining through their lifespan? At the levels of communities and of society, a university can ask itself how much it is helping communities and society to flourish. Is society learning about itself, and its many communities, such that such that those societal learning processes are not just sustained but enhanced? (143)

In researching issues of this nature, it is necessary to study further the ways in which HE prepares a society for its rapidly changing future, and in that to focus especially on the variations in critical thinking, and the origins of those variations. The Whitley framework for comparing actorhood facilitates that. It might then be possible to throw more light on why so many countries run into the roadblock of the middle-income trap and stop growing, why autocracies eventually suffer from the conformities on

which they are philosophically founded, and why mass migration at unprecedented levels may be expressing unspoken despair at the societal weaknesses in innovativeness and cooperativeness that flow – at many removes – from inadequacies in critical thinking.

A key assumption made here is that the effective adaptation of a functioning social system will always rest on the expression of its intentionality after those intentions have been processed with the best mental rigour through the society's own system of consciousness. For those processes to be effective, the decisions as to what changes need monitoring, and then how to adapt to them, are best left to open debate. Such debate would receive relevant frameworking and guidance from a society's thinkers, but their freedom to think would remain a cornerstone of any successful evolutionary process. That is why societies institutionalise the learning function, and, for effective evolution that rationale may need defending when it is at risk. Open information about that risk is just such a defence.

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● IVY League
 ● UK redbrick
 ● China/State

KEY SURROUNDING INFLUENCES

- A** = State delegation of discretion over organisational identity, goals
- B** = State delegation of discretion over managerial coordination
- C** = Dependence on state funding
- D** = Concentration of control over state funding
- E** = National oligarchic control of academic careers
- F** = Interventionist public administration regime
- G** = State control of elite labour markets
- H** = Importance of research intensive industries

Fig 1. Sources of university actorhood (with acknowledgments to Whitley 2012)

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