Recession-oscopy

Can universities be the light at the end?

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This paper paints the philosophical and ethical backdrop to some of the issues raised in *Australian Universities' Review* vol. 53, no. 2. It links academic performance pay; the measurement of research output; and the astonishing pay levels of vice chancellors to the present global financial crisis. These are explained as part of a general malaise of institutions, which has its roots in the early Enlightenment. Drawing from semioticians Charles Sanders Peirce and John Deely it uses the terms *ideoscopy* and *cenoscopy* to characterise the hijacking of unwarranted scientific status for much of the way our world is managed. But crisis can lead to opportunity. Consequently, the paper points to the glaring opportunity for thinkers who can articulate the present situation in a way which could avert disaster.

Introduction

How will the looming Global Financial Crisis (GFC) Mark II affect our lives? How will it affect universities here and overseas? What will courses and students look like under a regime of global austerity? Will Europe disintegrate into social strife? And, not to put too fine a point on it, what is going to happen to our superannuation? Nobody seems to know the answers to any of this. But, as TV financial pundit Alan Kohler put it in an ABC interview in January: 'This is a very interesting time for people in my caper.' Kohler was talking about his excitement as a specialist journalist during this 'once in a lifetime financial crisis event'. But is this also an interesting time for those of us in the 'academic caper'? I'd like to answer: well, yes. But, well, perhaps no. I'll attempt to justify this vacillation with the two words: 'ideoscopy' and 'cenoscopy'. And this is where it gets a bit academic…

The cult of ideoscopy

Readers whose internal health has ever been questioned would probably be among the first to recognise the suffix of these two words as to do with something that probes into unusual places with a light at the end. However, 19th century philosopher of semiotics and pragmatism Charles Sanders Peirce would have had no idea about this future implication. He coined the terms to mean respectively: knowledge originated in special scientific ways which it is hard to understand if you are not a relevant specialist; and knowledge which can be worked out by many people if they apply logic and experience to common sense, (Peirce, 1955, p. 66), (Peirce, Weiss, & Hartshorne, 1974, passim). Deely (2008) and (2009) uses these terms to explain how modernity from Descartes onwards went too far down the ideoscopic track – the 'trust in the experts track' – the 'call for the consultants track'. Deely's argument in his 2009 book contrasts Peirce's ideoscopic and cenoscopic notions to make the point that philosophy took an unreasonably nominalist turn in the 17th century. Deely's multi-book project champions a deeper understanding of the realism of the correct semiotic approach, as opposed to misunderstandings of semiotics. He writes in the tradition stemming from the scholastics which runs through John Poinsot (1589-1644) and Peirce (1838-1914). Part of his concern is the difficulty caused by over-fascination with

science and social science. He argues that scholarship was a cenoscopic activity from the times of the early Greeks right up to the 17th century when:

> One way of understanding that historical period or epoch in European history called 'the Enlightenment' is precisely as that period when ideoscopy began to take hold and demand institutionalisation within the framework of the developing 'community of inquirers' inspired by the idea of the university... The exuberance of the early generation of inquirers who turned to ideoscopy, especially in the mathematisation of the results of experimentation and observation acquired by the systematic use of instruments which extended the unaided sense powers of the human body, led to a naive but general expectation that ideoscopy, the development of science in the definitively modern sense, would 'slow by slow' supplant cenoscopy entirely (Deely, 2009, p. 4).

The argument of this paper is that Enlightenment overenthusiasm for ideoscopic 'experts' rather than more generally dispersed cenoscopic good sense bears responsibility for many aspects of the pretty pass which we are in today. Using Deely and Peirce's terms it appears obvious that the world's financial maestros have been operating in an ideoscopic manner. They have expounded their expertise in the use of hard to understand, mathematically designed 'financial products', 'products' which have resulted in economic chaos. They have honed their 'instruments' behind a veil of: 'You wouldn't understand.' But now they are coming into view cenoscopically, i.e. in common terms, to show what these 'instruments' really are. They are 'schemes' ...and they are often schemes which look quite odd. Some are schemes which should not be associated with the terms 'science' or 'expert'. What this sudden 'the King has no clothes' vista suggests is that in the post Enlightenment world, mass estrangement from participation in the creation of knowledge, mass alienation from great swathes of understanding, has allowed vital areas of life to be unnecessarily obscured sometimes with disastrous consequences. Earning, borrowing, paying back and spending money is one of these areas. This is an area which is not rocket science. In the credit card era most of us earn, borrow, pay back, and spend every day. We are highly experienced in this activity. But those who do this on a scale capable of collapsing the world economy while they make big money out of it have opted to pretend that what they do is far too hard for ordinary people to understand. Instead of engaging in transparent, public debate these 'experts' have secreted themselves and their processes away. They have renamed schemes – 'products' and 'instruments' in order to make them sound more scientific, more 'the realm of experts'. Because of this sleight of hand, one of the most important foundations of civilisation has been ceded to people now revealed to be either not at all clever or not at all ethical. It is apparent that many of them are at best so confident of their own infallibility that they are deluded. At worst many are charlatans who have taken advantage of ideoscopic cultural tendencies in a way which now threatens financial ruin for many. The bankers of course continue to extract high fees or retire on big pensions.

After virtue

But it is not only financial managers who have enjoyed undeserved status because of the ideoscopy of modernism. In *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre implies that the whole of western society is riddled with people benefiting from the mythology of expert scientific management:

> Expertise becomes a commodity for which rival state agencies and rival private corporations compete. Civil servants and managers alike justify themselves and their claims to authority, power and money by invoking their own competence as scientific managers of social change. (MacIntyre, 1985, pp. 85-86)

> But what if effectiveness is part of a masquerade of social control rather than reality? What if effectiveness were a quality widely imputed to managers and bureaucrats both by themselves and others, but in fact a quality which rarely exists apart from this imputation? (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 75)

Civil servants and managers who legislate and run universities are a case in point. They tend to welcome ideoscopically justified instrumental and vocational studies at the expense of the more cenoscopically friendly humanities. At the same time pure science - studies of what science really is - is similarly downgraded. Because of the mind set of ideoscopy the ability of students to critique and explore is reduced. Why would graduates need to think for themselves when the world is so complicated? Why can't they call in the experts, call in the consultants, call in someone to do their thinking for them? This is the unadmitted rubric of universities which are increasingly driven by the priorities of industry and the priority of client career choice. This concentration on doing things rather than thinking risks eroding the intellectual culture, the intellectual quality of universities. It has led to professors looking like rabbits caught in the car headlights, impotent and dumbfounded in the current crisis. Where is their understanding about what is really going on as we slide ever closer towards what Bank of England Governor Sir Mervyn King has described as: 'the most serious financial crisis at least since the 1930s, if not ever?' (Elliot, 2011).

The looming crisis

After a seemingly prosperous expansionary period suddenly we face a decade when in Europe and the US, if not more widely a trillions of dollars disruption is imminent. This means food, heating, healthcare, shelter, transport, education, employment and the organisation and funding of these, whether public or private, will be in shorter supply. Where this does not result in people dying earlier it certainly means life will be less pleasant. Would it have come to this if people had been educated to really understand what was going on with their countries' finances; with their countries' governance; with their countries' morality? If universities had properly stimulated thought into what the financiers were risking would citizens have happily agreed to the greed involved? If voters had been sufficiently taught the history of similar episodes would they have gone along with the deception? If people were participating in cultural expression which reflected the nonsense would they have remained content with political processes? Would aware, informed and intelligently participating populations have been content to let a semi-secret industry blight personal lives for a large part of the 21st century?

We hear little snippets of 'research' here and there... the Greek suicide rate is up; the Irish are increasing migration again; UK household incomes are sliding; the use of water cannon has been considered on the UK mainland. But what is happening in universities at this interesting time for those of us in the 'academic caper'? Where are the major debates? Where is rigorous analysis of the financial viability of advanced western societies and analysis of the viability of other societies which depend on our viability? Where are the insightful forecasts of what sort of countries both varieties will be in ten years time? What opportunities might be taken of a shattering of post-war presumptions about how the world might be? How might the enormous resource of millions of out of work income seekers be harnessed? How could environmental and sustainable-planet improvements mesh with these factors?

Are we all idiots?

These sorts of questions and the responses which they seek are not beyond the understanding of most of us. They and many similar discussions should be everyday parlance – pub talk, hair salon gossip. In the cenoscopic era of the Greek polis ordinary citizens were referred to as 'idiots' if they were not able to articulate these sorts of public affairs:

> Athens's ancient city wall contained the inscription: 'The man with no public business has no business'. Underscoring that observation, the ancient Greek word for a person mute on public affairs was 'idiot'. (Hauser, 1999, p. 19), (eNotes, 2011)

Major economic malaise is urgent public business. Everyone should be discussing it intelligently. Why are we not? Are we all idiots? Or are we mute because of the cult of ideoscopy? Has everyone, including university staff ceded this sort of discussion to the realm of the 'expert' – the opinion editorial writer; the political pundit; the blogger; the whoever-appears-on-the-TV-screen? What seems to be the case is that where mass thinking is not trapped into totally irrational literal religiosity – as in much of America – it is trapped into an irrational belief in experts. Democratic systems require politicians to at least feign alignment with majority public belief. But majority public belief is stuck at the 'modern' stage described by Deely. The 'post-modern' is still not a term to be used in polite company without a smirk. Consequently, politically controlled universities are unlikely to pass on the realisation that the omnipotence of the modern scientific expert is as much a myth as is literal religion. Individual scientists and individual scientific projects are of course often brilliant and indispensable. But this does not qualify institutions to claim pseudo-scientific justification for their methods of deciding what should and what should not get taught; how it should or should not be taught; and what status and encouragement should be attached to particular subjects.

Ideoscopy and academic management

For the same reasons the feigned 'scientific management' of academics should be opposed. The inappropriate application of ideoscopy is the core contradiction of both performance related pay for academics and journal ranking fetishism as discussed in *AUR* vol. 53, no 2, (Harkness, 2011), (Young, 2011). Cenoscopically we would argue that it is intelligent and moral academics who do the better job in comparison to academics who are on incentive bonuses or whose work is more closely measured. But professionalism; intelligence; a sense of vocation; and morality are difficult attributes to measure. They are the priceless qualities which enable any department or group of employees to function well together. But these are qualities which are downplayed or ignored when ideoscopy becomes a cult which demands the 'hard facts' - the mathematisation of everything. There is another striking manifestation which comes to the fore when ideoscopy becomes

a cult. This is the proliferation of increasingly higher piles of cash that are dropped like votive offerings at the feet of so called experts who achieve the rank of demigods: top bankers; VCs; other CEOs. It is not their professionalism, their morality, their collegiality which is measured to qualify them for their bonuses. Instead they promise interview panels that they will achieve performance targets which can be validated in some mathematical manner: university research ranking; student satisfaction statistics; budget outcomes and so on. But piles of cash and the super-executive power and status which wealth implies tends to insulate top managers. They become cocooned behind an outer office of those much lower on a steep power gradient. Underlings are people who are far more likely to take a 'Yes Minister' approach than to be critical peers. In their private lives the ostentation of VCs as the enriched beneficiaries of the cult of misplaced ideoscopy further undermines the power and morale of ordinary, well meaning professionals. Cenoscopic collegiality declines as ideoscopically based propaganda dominates organisational relations.

In this way it can be argued that every time we hear about a vice chancellor being awarded an obscene pay level we are in fact seeing a further blow to the professional nature of higher education. As VC pay levels reach the stratosphere, higher education falls into line with an intellectual repression now overseen by the business people and technocrats – the ideoscopically justified 'experts' who have displaced educationalists on university councils. Vocational education is all very well and good. Universities were founded on the need to teach medicine and law. But every time an academic manager says something like a dean once said to me: 'I think you should leave that semiotics stuff alone' [and concentrate more on my vocational subject – public relations], then, just like happens in Peter Pan, something dies somewhere – something fundamental to the deepest responsibilities of academics, [with apologies to]: (Barrie & Unwin, 1951).

Conclusion

The current economic sickness is a symptom and a wakeup call which points to deafness and blindness towards public affairs in many modern institutions. In the institution of the university it is the academic's responsibility to throw off a central aspect of this sickness: the misuse of the ideoscopic legacy. Proper status needs to be reattached to cenoscopic thought, to the realisation of the ability of ordinary people to understand and intervene into the way their world works. This implies a change of educational priorities from churning out masses of rarely read technical trivia in order to meet irrelevant metrics to a deeper examination of the basis of contemporary understandings. We need a better grasp on what is really obscure knowledge and what is merely obscurity. University Councils' members drawn from industry and commerce must be replaced by genuine, intellectually committed educationalists. We cannot risk another decade without people being educated properly. As Kohler says of his profession this is indeed an interesting time for people in our 'caper': academia. It is a time of crisis – and consequently of opportunity. It is a time when the bases of many social and economic understandings are vulnerable to constructive questioning. One of these constructive questions is to do with the balance between ideoscopic and cenoscopic ways of investigation the world. Deely and Peirce are clear that proper scientific method and mathematics are vital to the ways the contemporary world works. But we need to review what can really be understood scientifically and where science is merely being hijacked for the propagandistic exploitation of its prestige.

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