

‘Promising Spaces’: Universities’ Critical-Moral Mission and Educative Function

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Abstract

Attention has been drawn to reduction of universities’ purposes to serve economic interests only. This dissatisfaction has provoked thinking about how to reclaim a critical, moral role for universities in society. Inspired by contemporary utopian studies this paper brings together traditional ideas about how transmitting university knowledge connects to universities’ critical-moral functions, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach adapted for education, and Basil Bernstein’s theories about knowledge distribution. Focusing on the educative function, the aim is to develop a theoretically-informed and practical vision of a university education which is both personally transformative and able to produce critical citizens and workers. Research evidence from two projects on university education reveals ‘promising spaces’ (Cooper, 2014) in which to realise these aims. I conclude that there is reason to believe that the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and understanding in specific fields is key to preserving and recreating a critical-moral mission for universities wherever they are in the world, even though current conditions are inclement and unequal.

Keywords: Basil Bernstein, capabilities approach, knowledge, university teaching, utopian studies.

Introduction

The ideology of neoliberalism, which promotes free market economies, is widely challenged. Despite the financial crisis of 2008 being seen as the failure of neoliberal policies, they still characterise many governments’ approach to economic and social development. Detractors identify inappropriate commodification of areas of life such as education and health; the prioritisation of economic growth over other aspects of human wellbeing; and inequalities that arise from systems based on market values, including contemporary ‘austerity’ measures

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(see, in particular, work by renowned economists Paul Krugman [1997, 2009], Thomas Piketty [2014]; Amartya Sen [2001, 2010]; and Joseph Stiglitz [2013, 2015]).

Although there are variations by region and country, over the last thirty years higher education globally has undergone radical changes reconfiguring it as a mass, hierarchical system, characterised both by a sharp increase in demand and by intense competition for students and research funding. Increasingly, academics have voiced unease and outrage, and engaged in active opposition to the ‘marketisation’ of higher education. Commentary and research have focused on the perpetuation of inequalities despite widening participation in a hierarchical system (for example, Boliver 2011; Brown and Lauder, 2012; Brown, 2013); the curtailment of academic autonomy by a tranche of compliances and regulations (for example, Docherty, 2011; Morely 2003; Strathern, 2000); students becoming ‘instrumental’, having succumbed either to the hedonism of university life or to consumerist discourse (Molesworth et al, 2010; Williams 2012); and, casting university education as a private rather than public good which threatens its critical purposes (for example, Brown and Carasso, 2013; Bailey and Freedman, 2011; Collini 2012; Giroux, 2014; Holmwood, 2011; McGettigan, 2013). Although it is almost two decades since Bill Readings (1996: 2) declared that the meaning of the University is ‘up for grabs’, there might still be ground to be claimed on which to build a critical, social role for universities.

The potential of utopian methods for thinking about higher education

Opposition to neoliberal change in universities sketched above analyses the worsening situation and carries the message that action should be taken to avoid an even worse future. Although these analyses imply better futures, they emphasise the dystopian aspects of what is going on now. There are fewer accounts which outline what the more desirable alternatives to now might look like (for example Barnett, 2005; Bok, 2004; Boni and Walker, 2014; Neary et al., 2012; Walker and Nixon, 2004). I propose to address this lacuna by framing the debate about the potential of university education for individuals and society within contemporary utopian studies.

There is a long tradition of interdisciplinary utopian scholarship with which I will not engage here (for this, see Levitas, 2011). For the purposes of the argument I want to make about universities, I draw, in the main, on the work of Ruth Levitas (2011, 2013) and Davina Cooper (2014). Levitas has developed a three-mode method for exploring what she calls ‘the imaginary reconstruction of society’ (2013). She describes the method as ‘speculative

sociology' (2013: 153) which offers 'provisional and reflexive models of possible futures open to criticism and debate'. The three modes are:

[A]n *archaeological mode*, piecing together the images of a good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies.

[A]n *ontological mode* which address the question of what kind of people particular societies encourage and develop.

[A]n *architectural mode*, that is, the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future, acknowledging the assumptions about and consequences for the people who might inhabit them (Levitas, 2013: 153, emphases added).

In the next section that deals with the knowledge and the critical-moral function of universities, I argue that all three modes are offered in universities by way of their traditions of educating through disciplines and professional fields for *Bildung*², democracy and a better society.

Davina Cooper (2014) has built on the work of Levitas to develop the concept of 'everyday utopias' which are characterised by 'the paradoxical articulation of the utopian and the everyday' (Cooper, 2014: 3). Cooper eschews impossible, abstract utopian blueprints in favour of concrete, viable, dynamic, flawed experiments which must adapt and change as people live them. Three of Cooper's concepts inform this paper: 'imaginings' refer to 'dreaming, longing and desire [and] hope' (Cooper, 2014: 3); 'actualisations' to the material practices and spaces that express imaginings; and 'promising spaces' to how everyday utopias prefigure more egalitarian, democratic and emancipatory ways of living. I use the traditional 'ideas' of the university to sketch 'imaginings' about what is possible through teaching, and the notion of 'actualisations' allows exploration of two empirical examples of pedagogical practices which aim to develop students as people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to 'make a difference' in society. In this sense, the educative function of universities operates as 'a promising space'.

When Cooper tested her theories about everyday utopias in five everyday cases³ she found 'a complex uneven relationship between how concepts are imagined and how they are

² The German concept *Bildung* generally refers to moral and intellectual development as a result of education and experience.

³ A Local Exchange Trading Scheme (LETS) in the UK established by left-wing people in the late 1990s in local areas to allow trading of goods and services without money exchange; the nudist movement in Britain, the US and Canada; a trans-sexual bathhouse in Toronto; the alternative British residential private school

actualized' (2013: 12); that 'the difficulties [...] of moving from dreams to practice [...] reveals not so much the pointlessness of dreaming as the difficulty in shaping and directing the process of change' (2013: 219). Both the difficulties of actualisation and the connections with mainstream life resonate with what it is to teach students at university. In an interview with Antu Sorainen⁴, Cooper, who is a law academic, said that despite the many contemporary problems with how universities are governed and regulated (pressure, bureaucracy, hierarchy, casualisation), she sees in universities 'the potential they have as everyday utopias of work' because there is still room for collaboration, collective accountability and creativity. In the next section, the concepts introduced in this section are related to the 'idea of the university' as a place of knowledge transmission.

Knowledge and the critical-moral functions of universities

In the archaeological mode of the utopian method -- as Gerald Delanty's (2001) history of universities usefully shows -- universities' historical mission has focused on the project of producing and reproducing knowledge for the good of society and the economy. The typical account of universities starts with the founding of the University of Berlin (1810) when the philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote a proposal about the University's constitution in which he set out his 'idea' that the university would be granted autonomy from the state in return for 'cultivation of the character of the nation' (Delanty, 2001: 33). The next landmark typically invoked is a text, published as 'The Idea of a University' (1960), containing a series of lectures given by Cardinal John Henry Newman when he was invited to be rector of the new University of Dublin in Ireland (1852). As a liberal catholic he articulated an oppositional alternative to the modern utilitarianism by calling for universities to be sites where intellects were cultivated by acquiring knowledge as an end in itself. Even today, when direct references to 'knowledge' have become rarer (Ashwin et al., 2015) first-hand experience and a cursory web-search reveal universities' core work to be research and teaching. So the imaginings of a good society embedded in the functions of universities concerns knowledge. While the production of knowledge in research is core work, in this paper I focus on the transmission and acquisition of knowledge or the educative function.

Summerhill founded in the 1920s by the educationalist A.S. Neill, classes are optional and rule-making is communal; and London's Speakers' Corner, a small part of Hyde Park where the Chartists of the mid-nineteenth century held mass protests against the suppression of the rights of working people. Since then people have gathered to speak about and debate about whatever concerns them in current affairs, especially on Sundays.

⁴ For the Allegra website <http://allegralaboratory.net/everyday-utopias-and-on-doing-conceptual-work/>

Acquiring knowledge at university can be seen as the ontological mode of the utopian method, it is the mode which asks ‘what kind of people [are] encouraged and developed’ (Levitas, 2013: 153). Almost a hundred years after Newman’s lectures, in 1946 Karl Jaspers, rector of University of Heidelberg in Germany, published *The Idea of the University* (1960) when the University reopened after World War II. He offered the education of the whole person (*Bildungsideal*) as the goal of universities, by which he meant the development of mental faculties, or intellectual character formation, through the acquisition of knowledge. Two decades later, the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas responded with his essay ‘The Idea of the University: Learning Processes’ (1989) where he calls for ‘critical renewal’ of the traditional idea of *Bildung* whereby learning processes within universities develop students’ minds towards critique of society and seeing alternative possibilities, and orient them towards argumentation and coming to agreements with others in the political public sphere. As sites of imaginings, universities are still places where students learn to think critically, to cultivate themselves, and to prepare for life and work.

The architectural mode can be found within an archaeology of universities which reveals that educational and social theory has traditionally proposed a bundle of functions. Habermas (1989), for example, drawing on Talcott Parson (1973), identifies four functions centred on knowledge:

1. technically exploitable knowledge for a producing wealth and services;
2. professional and vocational knowledge for the academic preparation of public service professionals;
3. transmission, interpretation and development of cultural knowledge (which he also refers to as the ‘tasks of general education’, 1989: 121); and,
4. critical knowledge or ‘the enlightenment of the political public sphere’ (1989: 118).

The interest here is in the last three functions which focus on universities’ educative functions and prefigure both the formation of a critical type of person, citizen and worker (the ontological mode) and a better society (the archaeological mode). In this sense, the architectural mode of the utopian method operates in what Readings (1996: 163) calls the ‘scene of teaching’ where day-by-day many academics seek to actualise the goals of producing knowledgeable, critical students.

Knowledge acquisition as ‘promising spaces’: bringing together theoretical and empirical bases

Guided by the concepts of utopian studies, I conceptualise universities as ‘promising spaces’. Embedded in their history, in the kind of graduate projected, and in the functions allotted them can be found an ‘imagining’ that connects the transmission and acquisition of knowledge to the production of critically engaged citizens and workers. In the rest of the paper I want to show that utopianism, in the sense that I have set out above, can be enlightened by different theories and different empirical examples. That is, more than one theoretical lens or empirical context can provide ‘provisional and reflexive models of possible futures open to criticism and debate’ proposed by Levitas (2013: 153). Two projects both focusing on university curriculum and pedagogy are used to illustrate this: one looked at professional education in South Africa and employed the ‘capabilities approach’ developed by Amartya Sen (2001, 2010) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), and the other used Basil Bernstein’s (2000) theories about the distribution of knowledge applied to undergraduate sociology-related social science in the UK.

I was a principal researcher on both projects, and although they had different aims and were carried out at different times, both express my broad interest in university education and social justice. Utopian studies suggest a way of synthesising the findings of these research projects in terms of, on the one hand, conceptualising theoretical resources as imaginings of how the acquisition of university knowledge might contribute to a critical moral function; and, on the other, of conceptualising the empirical accounts as actualisations, that is of concrete, practical, imperfect attempts to realise the critical-moral function of universities. I will discuss each project in turn highlighting in both how knowledge acquisition appears theoretically and empirically as grounds for hope in a critical-moral function for the university.

Public-good professional capabilities

The capabilities approach was first developed by the economist Sen (2001) to conceptualise people living in poverty as deprived of opportunities to choose a life of well-being because of lack of capability to live, for example, healthily, or in a dignified manner, or with opportunities for enjoyment. The term ‘capability’ refers to opportunities to choose to be and do what an individual desires. The imagining involved is human flourishing, which does not rely on money alone. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) further proposed a list of ten

comprehensive human capabilities to which everyone should have the right⁵. Further to this, Melanie Walker and others have used the capabilities approach to think about purposes and values of higher education in relation to agency, learning, public values and democratic life (Walker, 2006; Mclean et al, 2013a). In the case below, I attempt to show that the capability of professional knowledge is necessary to develop professionals who could work in socially and politically responsive ways to address problems in society.

‘Development Discourses: Higher Education and Poverty Reduction in South Africa’⁶ was a project investigating the education of five professional groups (lawyers, engineers, religious ministers, social workers and public health workers) in three universities in South Africa (under the divisive policies of apartheid one had been forblack, and two white, one Afrikaans and one English medium). A capabilities approach was adopted to theorise, investigate and discuss learning outcomes for graduates entering professional fields in South Africa. The project produced indicators of ‘public-good professionalism’ in the form of a set of eight capabilities developed by way of university education that could be applied across the professional fields.

Motivation for the project was provided by the socio-economic and political context. South African society continues to confront the multiple legacies of apartheid. More than twenty years after apartheid ended, institutionalised racial oppression overlaid on class discrimination still causes extreme inequality so that, despite economic growth, the majority of black South Africans are both poor and deprived. The official unemployment rate is high, and South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Further, the incidence of violent crime is high and the country has the world’s highest number of HIV/AIDS cases (Bhorat and Kanbur, 2006; Bhorat and Oosthuysen, 2006; Robins, 2006). At the same time, the progressive South African constitution calls for social transformation, and university education is seen as a key to achieving this end. The assumption underpinning the project was that such a context needs professionals who are oriented to tackling the social and economic problems posed, in particular poverty reduction. In the project, therefore, university-based professional education was seen as a promising space for society. The heart of the project was to apply the notion of ‘capability’ to the formation of students’ professional beings and doings to evaluate the extent to which the students were oriented to the public good.

⁵ They are: life; bodily health; sense, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and, control over one’s own environment (Nussbaum, 2000).

⁶ Funded by The Economic and Social Research Council and Department for International Development (ESRC RES-167-25-0302). The full story of can be found in Walker and McLean (2013)..

For each profession we had interviews, discussions and meetings with students, lecturers, a head of department, a dean or deputy dean, alumni practising in the professional field, and representatives from relevant non-governmental organisations. Those involved were asked about what might be called their imaginings: about what transformation means, and about what kinds of professionals a transforming South Africa needs. They were also asked about educational actualisations: what educational arrangements develop the qualities and values of the professionals South Africa needs; what is the role of universities in their development; and what are the constraints and enablements in society for such professionals. Finally eight capabilities were agreed upon: knowledge and skills; an informed vision; affiliation; resilience; integrity; social and collective struggle; emotional awareness; confidence and assurance.

Here I focus on the capability of ‘knowledge’ which permeated discussions in all professional groups, and I concentrate on the field of engineering, which might be expected to be less interested in critical-moral aspects of education than fields such as social work or theology.

The central importance of acquiring engineering knowledge and skills, and of producing innovative, logical problem solvers, ran through all the courses in the degree programme. The imagining of the type of engineer that was needed connected poverty reduction to competent design, logical thinking and problem-solving. The Dean said:

I think engineering’s role as a catalyst in poverty relief is actually much larger than most people realise because where do you start if somebody hasn’t made the appropriate design? I think we should focus on making sure that we have the initiators and the integrators, and the innovators. That’s what we should focus on primarily.

In the context of South Africa’s high levels of poverty, engineering knowledge was seen as especially important for finding cost-effective and workable solutions which might improve quality of life in disadvantaged communities. Participants thought that the intelligent application of engineering knowledge would allow them to contribute to this. It should be noted that the university offering engineering was historically Afrikaans and we interviewed 5 students and 4 alumni. Of these one was black, one coloured and one Indian, the rest were white. With the exception of the one black student interviewed, the students and staff were from privileged backgrounds, which, as will be seen, had salience for their perceptions and their education.

Pieter, a white student, thought that the kind of engineers that South Africa needed were:

Smart ones. We need engineers who find new ways to do stuff easier and better, and cheaper and more reliably. You really need guys who think a lot. We need people who can understand the problems and speak to them and try and fix them. You haven't always got what you need everywhere and you have to make do with other stuff sometimes; and you have to kind of rise above that and get your work done and get it done in such a way that it's quality work. [...] There are challenges in terms of [...] needing to make local solutions [...] you have to be innovative.

Thus, if engineers want to contribute directly to social transformation through infrastructural projects in disadvantaged communities, they must acquire sound knowledge of engineering principles combined with logical, lateral thinking.

While engineering knowledge and problem-solving ability was the *sine qua non*, another kind of necessary knowledge acquisition was identified. This was knowledge about the social realities of South Africa and of the political context in which the new engineers would be working. The head of department said:

Our feeling is that once [an engineer] goes into industry [s/he] would realise that business is driven not only by business but by the political system within which that system operates [...] So for them to actually understand political systems and the philosophy behind the systems, I think it's just a benefit for us.

Alluding to the privileged background of most students, a lecturer, Marion, pointed out:

Students live in a kind of a bubble and it's really theoretically based, everything works, they can go to the labs and they can have their projects and their machinery and everything would be intact, but the moment you start working with people from a different environment and a different background than yours, and you don't have that knowledge, I think it can be a problem.

And according to the Dean:

Once they practice as engineers, that's the society they'll work with, and that's the society for whom they will provide engineering solutions. So it's good now [...] to broaden their perspective and understanding and see that they have something to offer but you have to offer it in context.

Students themselves were aware of the need for this knowledge: 'If you are an engineer you still have to understand politics and you still have to understand other parts of the world' (Pieter) and:

I don't see it now because I haven't been in the workplace. All I can say is that I'll probably need it one day. There are problems that need to be solved, maybe political problems that I might be involved maybe at the workplace; and I'll probably have to think about what did I learn in politics, what I learnt in ethics, what did I learn in philosophy, and how can I apply this knowledge to the problem that I'm currently in now. (Mandla, a black student)

Jeanne, a white working alumni, observed: 'one of the biggest things is just to see the bigger picture and to be able to look at what exactly is needed to improve the greater South Africa'.

The desire to produce engineering graduates knowledgeable about South African social and political realities was actualised in a module called 'Society in Perspective' which, albeit not a compulsory module, was designed as a response to the perception of students' lack of knowledge in these areas. 'Society in Perspective' aimed to provide students with an awareness of the levels of poverty in their country and to give them an understanding of political theory and context, and of how engineers might engage with existing inequalities and power structures. The module had a theoretical component of academic lectures in philosophy and political science through which the students were able to gain knowledge about the wider political context and causes of poverty. In the practical component students tutored secondary school students in Maths and Physical Science at two secondary schools in disadvantaged communities. Students reported that after completing this module they had a better understanding of the political context in which they would be working, for example, Dawie, a white student, said:

It gave all of us a broader perspective of how South Africa politics works, because if you're working in industry and you know 'this is the law that governs our emissions' and 'Parliament wants to put a new Bill out', it changes that – you'd need to know how that works and how could you change it because it will affect your company.

Students also reported an increased awareness of the realities of life in disadvantaged communities. For many of the white students such as Pieter, entering a disadvantaged settlement was a completely new experience:

We never really saw shacks [before] I came to Cape Town a lot, and there you drive along the freeway and you see all the shacks. I've never been inside – and then we went in. You see the poverty and it is really bad how the people live...I think really something should be done. (Pieter, white student)

Gaining greater awareness of disadvantage was not limited to white students. Mandla already had experience of disadvantaged lifestyles in South Africa, but not of the particularly cramped and unsanitary conditions of informal settlements:

I grew up in a village, and the homes are situated far from one another, and there's space, they're built on bricks. So seeing people living in shacks like that[...] I mean, if a fire breaks out in one shack, they all catch fire; there could be death. And I think that place wasn't very clean. And there's a lack of sanitation. (Mandla, a black student).

Many of the students' existing ideas and perceptions of disadvantaged societies were challenged. They expressed discomfort, frustration and non-acceptance that such levels of inequality continue to exist in South Africa today, and these responses, which might lead to socially and politically responsive professional action in the future, were provoked by knowledge gained in this module.

Of the ontological mode of the utopian method Levitas (2013: 153) asks: 'What is understood by human flourishing, what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed, by specific existing and potential social arrangements?' What appears above about the efforts of the engineering department is about producing or shaping a public-good engineer interested in human flourishing in South Africa. What is important here are the efforts to actualise imaginings about a specific type of engineer, even if it played out imperfectly both in the university settings and in actual professional practice (as the alumni attested) because the socio-economic and political constraints were and remain enormous.

Bringing knowledge back in (Basil Bernstein)

The second empirical example of how knowledge acquisition at university can be cast as a utopian critical-moral project which transforms individuals and society is provided by the 'Pedagogic quality and inequality in undergraduate degrees'⁷ project which investigated curriculum and pedagogy in undergraduate sociology-based social science education in four universities in England occupying different positions in published league tables, which signal their status. To convey these positions, the universities are called 'Community', 'Diversity' (regularly rated in the bottom third of league tables), 'Prestige' and 'Selective' (regularly rated in the top third). For this project, the salient social grouping was socio-economic class,

⁷ Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-1438, November 2008–January 2012)

as poorer students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely to attend the lower-status universities. Altogether 96 students were interviewed in the four departments of which 31 (between 6 and 9 in each university) were interviewed in each of the three years of their degree. The interest of the research team was in whether the league table position was reflected in the quality of teaching and learning outcomes of the students in the different departments. As I will show, it was not.

The project employed a theoretical framework taken from the sociologist of Education, Basil Bernstein (1924-2000)⁸ whose complete *oeuvre* develops theories about how unequal distribution of knowledge in formal education systems reproduces inequalities in society. His theory is that curriculum content and pedagogic processes shape what individuals and groups think and feel about what it is possible to be and do. Abstract knowledge operates between the outer world of material conditions and an individual inner world, opening up possibilities for living, and universities are ‘official pedagogic’ sites (Bernstein, 2000: 20) for the distribution of knowledge. The system is structured hierarchically both materially and symbolically by way of resource inequities; the different social positions of students in different status universities and reputation are reflected in league tables.

Bernstein’s concept of ‘pedagogic rights’ proved generative for exploring what students gained from their education and can be connected to the capabilities approach (McLean et al., 2013a, 2015). He proposed three interrelated rights and access to results in a human capability: individual enhancement results in the capability of being confident; social inclusion in the capability of belonging; and political participation in the capability of making a contribution to society. Below I show how students’ accessed these rights by way of disciplinary knowledge. A main finding was that in the departments we investigated access to these rights by way of university education was *not* distributed according to the status of the university or according to the social class of students.

Individual enhancement: Confidence

The first pedagogic right, individual enhancement, is to ‘the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities’ and access to it expands personal horizons, resulting in ‘confidence’ (Bernstein, 2000: xx). The achievement of individual enhancement requires boundaries to be ‘experienced [as] tension points’ (Bernstein, 2000: xx). While the broader experience of

⁸ The complete theoretical framework is explained in McLean et al. (2013b).

university can be enhancing, the interest here is in how the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge might be experienced as a ‘tension point’. Bernstein (2000: 76) stated that in educational terms ‘enhancement entails a discipline’. In the case of acquiring sociology-based social science, students crossed a boundary between abstract disciplinary knowledge and previously held everyday knowledge about people and life. In the study, students repeatedly reported that having their minds ‘opened’ about themselves, others and society had changed them forever in ways that they valued and were committed to:

University has opened my eyes too much. I’ve been too exposed to reading certain things that are happening around me [. . .], I can’t just shut my eyes and go back to normality. I don’t think I can do that now, I’d feel like I am betraying myself and what I think and what I believe in. (Martin, white working-class, Community)

Because of what I’ve learned in terms of [. . .] knowledge about the way society is, it’s made me question more everything, and I like that because not everything has a definite answer, and I like the diversity of seeing everything differently and seeing new things and it impacts on me as a person, how I behave towards others [. . .] it’s helped me become a better person purely because of the experience and seeing new things. (Leena, Asian working-class, Diversity)

Such personal transformation is the result of the processes of seeing the relevance of sociology-based knowledge to everyday life. The acquisition of sociological knowledge assists students to, in John Dewey’s (1916: 16) words, ‘develop their minds’ for thought about their own lives and others. There were *more* expressions of having gained confidence and having horizons broadened from students in the lower-status universities, perhaps because the boundary they had crossed to get to university was greater than for most of the students in the higher-status universities.

Social inclusion: Belonging

The second pedagogic right is ‘to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally’ (Bernstein, 2000: xx). Acquiring specialised knowledge and understanding was a positional good which students now had access to when previously they had not, and this was especially valued by those whose parents were not of the professional classes:

I think it makes you be able to take part of the society more. The way you talk to your doctor. The way you talk to your banker [. . .] You have better relationships with other professionals [. . .]. You feel like your status is more on level with other professionals. Like, I can have a better conversation with my doctor because -not that I am understanding everything he is saying, but because I feel more in a place to debate with him. (Mark, white working class student, Community)

We cannot know whether Mark would have felt the same had he studied engineering. Social science knowledge does specific work. It illuminates the interaction between individuals and social systems or structure.

When Leanne (white, working class, Diversity) said that ‘Not everybody walks around and thinks “That’s an example of othering or stigmatisation”’, she gestured towards being differentiated in society by belonging to a group of people with a specialised sociology-based ‘gaze’. A further example is Fay distancing herself from the ‘average sort of mother’ in terms of being sensitive to gender stereotyping:

The average sort of mother reading to her child probably doesn’t notice the gender stereotyping in the books [. . .] but [. . .] if you are presented with a study saying, ‘Actually there are only half as many girl characters in books as there are boys’, I find it interesting there are so many things that you just don’t notice unless you study them. (Fay, white middle class, Prestige)

This knowledge allowed students to gain insight into and ask questions about why people, including themselves, are as they are and to develop a sense of solidarity with others. For example, Elliot illustrated how social science knowledge had contributed both to a sense of solidarity with others (which he did not have before) and to challenging the status quo:

And I find that really interesting, people’s attitudes towards girls that choose to have a baby from a young age, but how we sort of demonise people based on their class. The way that I find middle-class people really interesting, being, you know, middle-class myself as well and the way that they all look down on working-class people and not really realising that they’re doing it. They’ll just think, ‘How can they behave like that?’ (Elliot, white middle class, Selective)

The students expected to use their knowledge to enlighten others: for example, to argue with their parents about capital punishment (Leanne white working class at Diversity) or with their friends about the need to be sceptical about the news (Mary, white working class, Community).

In terms of social inclusion, our data suggest that sociology-based social science knowledge places students in two specific and related relationships to other people and to society in general: as those whose sociology knowledge gives them a sense of solidarity with others in society, especially those who are designated ‘different’; and as those who belong in and contribute to society by questioning and challenging what goes on in the world around them. It can be said then that the ‘rite of passage’ of the sociology-based degree invests students with specialised knowledge and understanding which has the potential to benefit society by way of their capability for affiliation/solidarity which, at the same time, gives graduates access to the right to be included in society at large.

Political participation: civic discussion and action

The third pedagogic right is to participate in debate and practices that have outcomes in society: ‘to participate in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social order’ (Bernstein, 2000: xxi). In Bernstein’s view, an effective democracy needs people who ‘have a stake in society’ by which he means they both receive (rights) and give (obligations). Evidence for the capability of civic discussion and action was considerably less than for the other two capabilities, few engaged in political activity.

Nevertheless, students often said that they could see ‘beneath the surface of things’ or ‘think outside the box’; they thought about ways in which society might be differently arranged, for example: ‘One of my mates just won’t watch the news because it is so depressing. But then I kind of look at it and think “why” and “what has happened” and “what can I do to change it”. Yes it is thought provoking’ (Mary, white working class, Community). Furthermore, when asked about future employment, most students envisaged public service work where their knowledge, understanding and dispositions will contribute to society:

I would like to become qualified as a teacher and I’d probably like to do teaching in poor inner city areas, but I really would like to get people thinking about current issues, and introducing ideas about equality and diversity, and feminism [. . .] That’s really exciting and something that I would have really loved as a young person to come across. (Ed, black working class, Selective)

I’ve looked at international affairs, international politics. That’s my real interest, that’s my passion. I’ve been looking at internships in Britain to do with like, working for NGO’s- like human rights, like Amnesty International, but also I’ve been looking at public affairs consultancy. Which is basically, I go to the government and I lobby

on behalf of a company or on behalf on an NGO. (Martin, white working class, Community)

Other students, not as clear as Ed and Martin, wanted to make a ‘positive contribution’ and variously explained how the knowledge they were acquiring helped them analyse how wrongs might be tackled at the levels of policy, organisations or personal intervention.

In summary, sociology-based social science knowledge enlightened the students in our study about themselves and others (individual enhancement); it located them in a loose group of people who have specialised understanding about how individuals and society interact (social inclusion), and it will be of use – in or out of employment – to improve the social world (political participation). While the students in the lower-status universities reported more personal transformation, we did not find differences between the lower and higher status university groups in access to the other two pedagogic rights, as we have defined them.

A main finding of the project was that in all universities the extent to which students’ sociological education freed them to imagine and act depended on the extent to which pedagogical practices mediated their engagement with disciplinary knowledge. For lecturers, academic and sociological values and principles constituted what Bernstein called ‘sacred knowledge’. Their imaginings for their students were broadly similar: they were interested in individual transformation through critical, self-reflective thinking and in the transformation of society through students’ understandings of societal injustices and the workings of power. The curriculum and pedagogy offered can be seen as actualisations (Abbas and McLean, 2010) Actualisation was found in curriculum design, including content, and in the pedagogical framing⁹.

Conclusion

Resources provided by contemporary utopian studies allow a more optimistic reading of what is happening in universities than is often the case. As Cooper (2014: 217) puts it: ‘With its emphasis on longing, hope, and desire for another better world, contemporary utopian scholarship is some distance from the paranoid reading of social life’. Levitas’s (2013) architectural mode shows universities’ connection with past ideas which can be re-discovered and re-interpreted. These ideas are about the critical-moral function of universities which are part of their fabric, and have never completely disappeared (see Delanty, 2001; Habermas,

⁹ There is not the space here to discuss what particular design and practices appeared to engage students in acquiring knowledge. This can be found in McLean et al. (2013c).

1989; McLean, 2008). In the strong adherence of university lecturers to producing critical, questioning, society-contributing subjectivities in students we can discern the ontological mode. The architectural mode can be found in curriculum goals and design.

Cooper's work on 'everyday utopias' reveals the perennial difficulties of turning imaginings into actualisation and argues against 'idealized normative concepts' (2014: 221). In my view, it is by investigating the empirical possibilities of university education through more fine-grained theories that such idealisation can be guarded against. The two lens that I offered above were connected by considering the power of university-acquired knowledge. The first was the capability approach used as a normative framework for thinking about the relationship between the capability for professional knowledge and professional action oriented to the public good; the second was Bernstein's theory about how knowledge distribution can both reproduce and disrupt societal hierarchies. Utopian studies is amenable to any empirical site or theory that carries possibilities of social justice, though there is little more promising than education.

Casting university education as a site of 'everyday utopia' in which knowledge transmission and acquisition is 'everyday' central work allows for an imperfect enterprise. Nevertheless, in this enterprise, Cooper's conceptualisation reminds us of the importance for individuals and society of tenacious attempts, even in unpromising conditions, to imagine and actualise in the teaching spaces of universities. Even against the odds, there is evidence that some students, at least, are receiving education which is personally transformative and forming them as critical citizens and workers. That said, it is important to acknowledge that evidence of the university as a critical space that was unearthed in the projects drawn on above was obtained by way of interviews, mostly while the students were still at university. It is not possible to make claims about how knowledge acquired was used in the students' post-graduation realities, which are often in contexts where challenging inequalities is often subordinate to the pressures of carrying out a neoliberal agenda.

Nonetheless, my claim is that there is reason to believe that it is possible to preserve and recreate a critical-moral role for universities in all countries in the world, even though current policies are not conducive. However, I endorse Cooper's point: 'What we have [not been] good at doing is arguing for the expansion of democratic, autonomous, collaborative, trust-based, creative ways of working'.¹⁰ We in universities need to explain and justify our type of knowledge work to the public and to the state and explain the social, critical -- as well

¹⁰ Interview with Antu Sorainen for the Allegra website <http://allegralaboratory.net/everyday-utopias-and-on-doing-conceptual-work/>

as technical and economic -- roles. There is space in which to do this. In South Africa, for example, an important White Paper (DoE, 1997) saw universities as vehicles for achieving equity and for contributing to social, economic, cultural and intellectual transformation after apartheid. And in the UK, the campaigns for humanities, social sciences and the public university that have been launched recently are agitating for debates about the value of the university for individuals and society (albeit in the context of recent Green Paper [BIS, 2015] whose proposals appear to further curtail opportunities for universities to be public, democratic institutions).

I end with the final words from Hannah Holborn Gary's (2012: 96) book about 'searching for utopia' in universities:

When all is said and done, it is remarkable how resilient our world of higher education has been and how great are the opportunities, in yet another time of crisis and if we can summon the initiative to strengthen its promise for the future.

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