



UNIVERSITIES IN AN ERA OF ‘NON-LIEUX’

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French philosopher Marc Augé describes “places” and “non-places” (“lieux” and “non-lieux”). Non-lieux are spaces that are essentially interchangeable, without distinctiveness. They tend to render humans anonymous. Think of the up-market malls scattered across major world cities, all pushing the same products by Gucci, Burberry, Fendi, Louis Vuitton and the like. In such a place you could be anywhere, or no-where. Big box retail is similar. So are airports. According to Augé, most provocatively, being “non-lieux” is what luxury hotel chains have in common with refugee camps.

The globalization of commerce has created more and more non-places. The fast food outlet in Bangkok could be in Phoenix, Calgary, or Paris.

A constellation of trends is pushing universities in the same direction – toward a homogenization that undermines our ability to fulfill the mission that has shaped our evolution over centuries. If universities cease to be highly differentiated, specific places with distinctive personalities, we will undermine the intellectual diversity needed to produce the catalysis that ignites new ideas, new discoveries and healthy social, cultural and economic innovation.

Three trends come together to undermine the sense of unique place and personality that is required for healthy intellectual biodiversity.

The first driver to uniformity is the ever-growing list of global university ranking schemes. By creating similar groups of metrics, the rankings signal that to be outstanding, a university must pursue a limited range of strategies: you can poach “star” researchers, focus on nominating staff for international prizes, and recruit a large number of international staff and students. There is almost no point in trying to improve the undergraduate student experience. In the ultimate perversity, for business school rankings, you better discourage graduates from doing any public service or from working in “secondary markets”; success is judged in large measure on the basis of graduates’ starting salaries. Uniformity of purpose and method is systematically encouraged and rewarded.

The second powerful impetus towards homogeneity is the increasing tendency of governments to try to “manage” research programmes and enrolment strategies. Most obviously, the desire to promote the acquisition of defined skills needed to fuel short term economic needs is growing apace around the world. Although this desire may seem reasonable, when linked to economic development strategies that are typically cookie-cutter copies of each other, the result is that universities are being pushed to do the same things everywhere. If I see another so-called “innovation strategy” that proposes to tell students that they will only find jobs if they pursue the STEM disciplines, I might just boil over in frustration. And the increasing tendency of governments to promote “applied research” through industry collaboration at the expense of funding for curiosity-driven research also leads to unhealthy uniformity, supporting the superficial consensus on what we need right now, undermining potentially disruptive discovery that shapes knowledge and changes industries and societies in the longer term.

The most recent impetus towards uniformity is the fixation with the promise of on-line learning, exemplified by Silicon Valley's investments in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Now, don't fear a Luddite outburst... I believe that we can learn from MOOCs, and that the intuitive sense that we need to "flip classrooms" and adjust to new learning styles is right. Solid new brain research on learning and retention supports the need to change definitively away from "the sage on the stage". But I am leery of the promise of master classes taught by the great and the good at a handful of universities being distributed across the globe. And while it might make sense for relatively standardized approaches to introductory organic chemistry to be agreed upon, I would eschew any attempt to settle on a uniform introduction to "theories of justice" or "the quiet revolution in Quebec" or "gender politics".

Throughout history, universities have played three interlocking roles, balanced differently at different times and in different places: teaching new generations; preserving and discovering knowledge; and contributing talent, ideas, advice and challenge to the wider society. In an era of 'non-lieux', universities are best placed to fulfill those roles today by resisting the pressures to uniformity, by situating ourselves firmly in our unique places, and contributing to an intergenerational dialogue that requires diversity and disputation.

We know that biodiversity is essential to healthy and sustainable ecosystems. Intellectual biodiversity is equally essential to healthy and sustainable societies, regionally, nationally and globally. Intellectual biodiversity is created in part by ensuring that truly distinctive contributions to debate can be made by people rooted in unique places – where a diversity of ends is being pursued.

If universities lose sight of where they are grounded, if they succumb to the uniformity encouraged by global rankings, government attempts to promote generic economic strategies, and "applied" research at the expense of free and disruptive inquiry, and by the siren call of anonymous on-line learning, then universities are at risk of turning into the "non-lieux" that Augé describes.

Some 22 centuries ago, Archimedes of Syracuse is reported to have said "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth". Of course, he was speaking of leverage, but I want to push the metaphor. As universities, our leverage and our ability to use that leverage to better our world, requires a place to stand; a unique place. A place defined by our traditions, our local history and culture, our special capacities and aptitudes, our physical geography and our positioning on the planet.

In an era of "non-lieux", let universities become more distinctive from each other. In that way we can bring unique resources and gifts to a global dialogue that requires diversity if it is to thrive. Let our universities be real places, places worth discovering, places from which – in working together – we can move the earth.