Higher Education, Civic Engagement, the Coronavirus and the 'New Normal'

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We hear repeatedly that we will have to 'live with Covid-19' and that there will be a 'new normal'. But what does that mean in the context of higher education? Many psychologists tell us there is a huge tendency after a crisis for people to want to 'get back to normal'. But is that possible after coronavirus? What does that mean we should just strive to return to the *status quo*? What I will try to do here is lay out some of the broad parameters of the debates and decisions we face in higher education while setting these issues within the broader context of democratic development and governance. I will also make an argument for the increased relevance of civic engagement, and community-based research, seeking to initiate a conversation amongst this sector in our new post-Covid order. To be clear, more than is normally the case, all arguments are provisional and subject to change in an era of supercharged complexity and risk. It will also, necessarily be an international collective endeavour to map a way forward and create a common strategy, that will seek to ensure higher education contributes to the enhancement of democracy in terms of society, international relations but also of knowledge.

Normal and pathological

First, we might need to think through the relationship between the normal and the pathological based on the seminal work on the subject by philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem, who argued that 'We shall say that the healthy man [sic] does not become sick insofar as he is healthy. No healthy man becomes sick, for he is sick only insofar as

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his health abandons him and in this he is not healthy. The so-called healthy man thus is not healthy. His health is an equilibrium which he redeems on inceptive ruptures. The menace of disease is one of the components of health.' (Canguilhem 1991: 56). How does this relate to the contemporary university? Was it healthy and then did it become pathological due to the coronavirus? For Canguilhem, being healthy and being 'normal' are not altogether equivalent since the pathological is but one kind of normal. Being normal also implies being normative but then being healthy (as in a body) implies being able to transcend the norm. To be in good health means being able to fall sick and recover according to Canguilhem. So, was the Western university really healthy before the coronavirus? Does the current pathology signal a simple accentuation of normal phenomena or does it lead to a 'crisis' defined in medical terms as 'the turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death'?

The Covid Crisis has brought home the essential role that universities play in contemporary society with its medical scientists playing a vital role in the search for a vaccine for example and in providing backup for vital pandemic tasks. Universities are major research centres and significant employers in cities and even regions. If the present funding crisis was to result in their failure that would have a catastrophic impact on learning, research and employment. But as publicly funded bodies they need to reflect the common good and reconsider the path of marketisation they have been on in recent decades. We need to make sure that the university that emerges from the Covid Crisis is better and more sustainable than the previous model and not worse or unsustainable.

We might also, at this point, take up a potentially positive reading of 'crisis' which is implicit in its definition as 'the turning point for better or worse in an acute disease or fever' (Merriam- Webster). There is good reason why democratic bodies and individuals

generally react in horror at the curtailment of civil liberties in some countries during the Covid Crisis deemed the only way to deal effectively with the virus. In this paradigm, people, not the virus, are posed as the problem and behavioural economists advise governments on how to deal with them. An alternative scenario would be that these very same people learn from the crisis that they are living through and call for fundamental system change. Rebecca Solnit has argued in *A Paradise Built in Hell* (Solnit 2010) that the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 and the 2001 Hurricane Katrina disaster in the US unleashed great reserves of human solidarity, energetic improvisation and purposeful intent that augured well for the future. In relation to the current Covid Crisis, Solnit argues that 'ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality' (Solnit 2020) so that fundamental change is overdue and a return to 'business as usual' is not an option. In other words, we may not wish to return to 'normal' and that the 'pathological' period we are living through can help us create the conditions for a new, more humane social order.

Shockwaves

It was within an already chaotic situation that the Covid Crisis emerged and sent real shockwaves through the global economy, now threatened imminently by a depression that would dwarf that of the 1930s. In March 2020 we witnessed a near fatal crisis in the financial system, only kept going though spectacular interventions by the Federal Reserve in the US, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank. Production and employment plummeted with the enactment of Covid 'lockdowns' and credit contracted dramatically. A historic drop in oil prices brought home the integrated and precarious nature of the global economy. The question now arises as to whether capitalism can once

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again rise from its sick-bed and recover its legendary animal spirits? For Adam Tooze any notion of a unified global order has now dissipated: 'we will somehow have to patch together China's one party authoritarianism, Europe's national welfarism and whatever it is the United States will be in the wake of this disaster' (Tooze 2020). We are certainly a long way from the optimism of 1989-90 when the collapse of communism and the beginning of globalisation painted a rosy future for capitalism.

The social impact of the Covid Crisis was very rapidly felt. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO 2020) by March 2020, almost half the global workforce – 1.6 billion people – were in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed by the economic impact of Covid-19. Of the total global working population of 3.3 billion, about 2 billion work in the "informal economy", often on short-term contracts or self-employment, and suffered a 60% collapse in their wages in the first month of the crisis, and of these, 1.6 billion face losing their livelihoods. In this rapidly evolving crisis the higher education system will not be immune. Already we have seen signs that many universities are dismissing staff amongst the approximately 40 % who are on precarious, temporary or part-time contracts. This will have a direct impact on the ability of universities to deliver high quality education and will impact in a devastating way on those employed at universities and their surrounding communities. In global terms we are facing a crisis of livelihoods of unprecedented proportions where a future without income, food or security is on the horizon for many. It is not surprising that forward- thinking economists such as Mariana Mazzucato are calling for a rethink of the global economic order as and when it 'reboots' (Mazzucato 2020). The universities cannot be separate from this debate if they are to rise to the challenge, not only as socially embedded organisations but also as 'thought leaders'.

Education dilemmas

At an online workshop I attended to launch a new Economist Intelligence Unit report (EIU 2020) Francisco Marmolejo (ex third-level specialist at the World Bank) stated that 'unless we disrupt, and are willing to take risks, as soon as conditions return to some sort of normal, we may try to become the same as we were before. This crisis is telling us we no longer have the luxury of assuming things will be as they used to be." That is the overall dilemma for higher education: seek a return to 'normal' or accept the need for disruptive thinking. The Economist Intelligence Unit report (EIU 2020; 7) itself offered four 'innovative' models

- Online universities [that] leverage the Internet to offer higher education "anytime, anywhere, to anyone". They tap into a growing desire for more flexible modes of learning and promise to dramatically increase access for long-marginalised groups. However, the past decade has also brought a much needed reality check about the challenges of online learning.

- The cluster model [that] eliminates the traditional siloed nature of university campuses by fusing multiple institutions. However, common priorities do not always exist across or even within institutions, which can make collaboration difficult.

- Experiential institutions[that] bring teaching out of the classroom, with learning driven by diverse experiences such as internships or hands-on projects. However, the experiential mode is also a new one and faces several challenges, including finding ways to align looser and longer-term projects with semester-time evaluation constraints.

- Liberal arts colleges [that] are typically smaller institutions that aim to provide a highly personalised university experience with a lower teacher–student ratio. However, higher teaching and facility costs mean that funding remains a challenge.

- The partnership model, [where] institutions build relationships with external partners in order to secure long-term funding and improve job prospects for graduates. However, low entry-level requirements have led to criticism that some institutions are providing sub-par qualifications to students who would struggle to complete courses at more traditional institutions.

While this might represent the type of models familiar in the North Atlantic region it does not strike me as sufficiently innovative and I wonder if this scenario planning represents simply a tinkering with existing models. One of the drawbacks of this modelling is also that it explicitly assumes higher education is an 'industry' subject to simple cost-benefit analysis. There is a strong argument that we need to 'return to basics' and ask or re-ask the question 'what are universities for*?'* (Collini 2012).

There are also very specific challenges being faced by the higher education sector that will impact on the way we do business in the future to put it that way. What we have taken to be 'normal' in higher education may not look so normal now. What we have called internationalisation has, in fact, been a narrow market- driven recruitment drive of fee-paying overseas students. We see now that the higher education system in the West had become dangerously dependent on this income. We also learn about the high environmental cost of this international travel: it is estimated that international student mobility related carbon emissions doubled between 2000 and 2015. This vital aspect of 'normal' functioning has been dubbed 'the internationalisation that wasn't' (Altbach and de Wit 2020, see also White and Lee 2020).

As we now move into a post- mobility world, so this flow of students across the globe will inevitably decrease. But that does not mean that internationalism is dead. On the contrary, the need for a sustainable internationalism will be even greater as the world recovers from

the Covid Crisis. Already we see some sharing of medical and epidemiology information and higher education, as a whole, has become much more open to collaboration. The new internationalism will need to be constructed on a democratic basis, rather than a narrow cost-benefit analysis and the lure of a quick and easy financial injection. What does internationalism mean in higher education today? We do need to 'go back to basics' I would argue.

Another area where we might reconsider the 'normal' working of higher education is in relation to online learning. For some time, it has become clear that the famous MOOCS were not the panacea for a new model online university in the era of globalisation. Where we are in terms of the Covid Crisis is a general enforced turn towards online teaching to deal with the physical closure of many universities. That has been necessary but not necessarily successful and not necessarily a turn we would want to sustain in a post- Covid situation where austerity and cutbacks lead to academic staff retrenchment. What has also now come to the fore is the depth of the digital divide with many educators in the global South pointing out that the enforced turn towards online learning in a context of poor connectivity and inadequate IT preparation, has only exacerbated existing inequalities (see Naidu 2020, Mbolila 2020, Mandal 2020). This situation has also been observed in the community teaching sector of the global North's higher education system where hidden digital divides now come to the fore. What will be necessary 'after' Covid is a sustained effort to democratise access to digital technologies and not a market driven turn to online teaching directed at the more affluent 'connected' sectors of society.

There is now a growing acknowledgement that 'business as usual' is not an option for higher education post- Covid. University vice chancellors tell us that higher education 'will change for ever' (see Mitcel 2020). But what does that mean in practice? If we recall the

reaction after the last major crisis, the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-09, we saw then a doubling down on the very policies that caused the crisis in the first place. Banks and financial institutions were bailed out by the tax-payer, regulation was soon put to one side and the casino economy was going once again. After the Covid Crisis there will be calls for a return to strong states and free markets. Will the university just accompany that move or find a new moral purpose as growing voices call for (see Harkavy et al 2020, Stückelberger 2020)? Are we actively exploring alternative scenarios for a post-Covid era university and developing strategies to achieve our preferred option?

What we require is nothing short of a re-invention of the purpose of the university. That education is a public good should be part of this new common sense. That education and not enterprise is the driving force of the university mission. What we are seeing is a general recognition that universities need to reaffirm their role in terms of social responsibility. The myriad ways in which they have responded to the Covid Crisis have made that role very clear to those working at the university but also a wider public. In particular, we see a growing recognition of the importance of community. It is community resilience and coherence that has ensured to a large extent the success of the various 'social distancing' measures taken by governments. Community engagement needs to come out of the Covid Crisis strengthened and empowered. If that happens the crisis will have had a beneficial aspect and we will all be stronger as a result of it. Community based research will also be more important as we realise that markets cannot do everything and society is not a myth as the neoliberal ideologues argued once. Communities need to be involved more in setting the research agenda for the post Covid university. Social responsibility needs to be more than a slogan for mission statements but a daily practice embedded across the university and its interactions with society and the political order.

It is worth noting in regards to the civic engagement mission that the Economist Intelligence Unit report referred to above declares that 'Today, civic engagement is needed more than ever, as societal trust continues to decline and common ties are fractured…A boost to civic engagement could help to restore trust and connections between networks of individuals from diverse backgrounds. The benefits would be diverse and substantial. Beyond reducing political polarisation, academics have shown that social ties help to boost economic performance (business relies on trust) and reduce violence and mortality. More broadly, social capital helps to cushion society against the impact of major economic, environmental or societal challenges, crises or transformations—of which several are on the horizon' (EIU 2020; 15). This seems a somewhat instrumental view of civic engagement that is not simply about generating trust for the business world, but it does acknowledge clearly that there are more serious shocks on the way. Just as with the coronavirus these are well known and the time to prepare is now. Engaging with society is clearly a vital part of this foresight exercise and will assist on building in more resilience to the current higher education order.

Democracy

Universities will also need to deal very openly and explicitly with the question of democracy sometimes side-stepped as being 'political'. Democratic governance is, by and large, put on hold and many critics hold fire, given the health emergency we are all living through, albeit under very different conditions. A simplistic 'authoritarianism' versus 'democracy' narrative has taken root, reminiscent of the Huntingdon debate of the 1970s around the dangers of democracy. There is a sense that democracy is not efficient when it is time to deal decisively with crisis, certainly Covid plans are not being put up to public scrutiny. The Covid Crisis has effectively disciplined democracy and civil society

worldwide, empowering authoritarian regimes and silencing their critics. But there has also been a flourishing of grass roots democracy through social solidarity and mutual support networks. Democracy cannot be 'postponed' without damaging it. As Frances Brown and colleagues put it: 'it is essential that supporters of democratic governance everywhere attend to this sweeping range of effects, both negative and positive, to identify entry points and interventions that can pre-empt long-term political damage and nurture potential gains' (Brown et al 2020). The university needs to be part of that democratic movement and promote an alternative vision for a sustainable society.

Democracy cannot be built on the basis of deep and enduring social inequalities. We have already referred to the digital divide, a present and immediate form of social exclusion in the university of today. But the Covid Crisis has also exposed a stark divide between the insured and protected and the uninsured and vulnerable sectors of the population. The differential impact of the pandemic in the UK and US has been stark, with disadvantaged communities suffering twice the number of infections than the average, a difference that goes up to three times the average amongst black and ethnic minority populations. The differences between the global North and South also lie in the open, with the latter seeing already depleted health systems and no ability to maintain basic income levels across the population. There has also been a deterioration of the democratic health of societies with an emergence of a naked 'survival of the fittest' mode of thinking and a return to a form of eugenics in regards to the elderly and vulnerable last seen in Germany in the 1940's. Universities cannot pretend this is a normal situation, it is more akin to a postwar reconstruction moment when accepted nostrums need to be set aside and the emergency on our doorsteps addressed with all urgency.

One of the concepts coming to the fore in the present crisis is that of 'resilience' with futurists such as Jeremy Rifkin arguing that with the Covid Crisis 'We must enter a new era: the «era of resilience»' (Rifkin 2020). Interestingly this is a concept that has been at the fore in international development studies (see Chandler 2014) signalling in general terms an ability to recover from or adjust easily to 'misfortune' or change. Individuals, communities and nations have varying capacities to recover from major catastrophes be they famines, pandemics or financial crises. It is often linked by development agencies to crisis or disaster risk migration or response. At its simplest, it is about how communities respond to stress. But there is a more critical, less policy- oriented interpretation of resilience that posits it not so much as goal but, rather, as a way of thinking and acting in a complex world. With traditional forms of political representation and even accepted versions of the right/left divide being seen as less relevant, a resilience lens may be well placed to generate responses to an increasingly insecure form of life where the real source of power lies in a diverse and plural community. It is precisely at this point that the strategy of civic engagement, and community-based research, needs to come to the fore to help articulate the debate on what the university after Covid, might look like.

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