The National Community and the University

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Abstract

In the current environment of globalisation, competition and engagement in the global knowledge economy, universities are increasingly expected to perform against global expectations. What can sometimes seem eclipsed in the current rush to perform against these global expectations is the mission of a university to engage and support the common good within a framework of nation building. Building a sense of shared national purpose and commitment to the common good by universities requires a serious look at how contemporary globalisation and the spread and ascendency of individualistic values is diminishing our sense of shared duty and genuine community engagement.

Introduction

Universities find themselves increasingly framed within a discourse of marketisation and globalisation. Against such a background a civic notion of the common good becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Caught between the increasingly down ward sticky pull of ethnic particularised and local identity and the concurrent demands of convergence to global neo-liberal marketisation and rationalisation the importance of firmly grounding higher educational institutions sense of community engagement in a sense of national intent and bonding is all the more important. The nexus point between personal and civic flourishing lies in education. The deep problem of how we give priority to the good without abrogating or unduly diminishing the rights of individuals is the fundamental problem that besets contemporary societies. Following the arguments of Aristotle we can argue that both the personal and civic flourishing is anchored in the cultivation of the social virtues.

Statecraft as soulcraft: community engagement as spiritual exercise

Historically the modern idea of the university has been strongly related to the rise of the nation state, national aspirations and the development of a civic culture (Zambeta, 2005). Marek Kwiek

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reminds us that the modern university in trust with the nation state has been the central and defining institution for knowledge production and the nexus between knowledge in the university and power in the nation state has been a critical relationship in the advancement of modern societies (Kwiek, 2000). State building and knowledge production has existed in close symmetry and the role of the university in modern societies was historically grounded in a sense of national intent and a desire to ground good citizenship in both a sense of moral obligation to fellow citizens and a sense of loyalty and bonding to the nation. By national intent we mean a particular configuration or view of the nation that manifests through state power as the dominant or prevalent (though not uncontested) way of framing national identity (Rotberg, 1966). Committed states and powerful senses of nationalism and civic obligation have informed the mission of the modern university historically. Bjorn Wittrock reminds us that:

'…universities form part and parcel of the very same process which manifests itself in the emergence of an industrial economic order and the nation-state as the most typical and most important form of political organisation'(Wittrock, 1993, p.305).

The important role of the university in nation building and the statecraft role of education has characterised the growth and development of universities in both the developed and developing worlds. This central role of higher education as being driven by nation building forms the basis of any workable educational statecraft agenda. However educational institutional institutions also play a role in soulcraft (Sandel, 1996). Soulcraft is defined as, 'the cultivation of virtue in the citizenry by the design of political, social and economic institutions' (Nagel, 2010, p.112). The importance of education to soulcraft and engagement with community is grounded in ethics of care, obligation and belonging. The need for educational institutions to represent the highest values and ethical concerns of a society provides the basis for a grounded and binding sense of the common good which is the critical basis for social cohesion in societies. Thus the relationship between statecraft and soulcraft is an important issue in discussing the ethical and moral commitments of a public university. Engaging the community is thus an act both of statecraft and of soulcraft.

The search for moral grounding and a sense of belonging to the *patria* (Gilbert, 2009; Zambeta, 2005) of the national community and the critical role state institutions play in this is central concern of this paper. The inculcation of loyalties and bonds to the imagined community of the nation is quite centrally an educative process. Given the multiple possibilities or diverse nations of intent that can exist within the geographic boundaries of nation states, the role that states and their critically important institutions play in inculcating, supporting and helping define forms of inclusive civic national bonding and the sense of mutual obligation that informs notions of the common good ought not to be dismissed. In all societies the importance and central role that education plays in nation building goes to the core of debates over the common good and social inclusiveness and justice. In developing societies, especially those who have to contend with the significant and ongoing heritage of colonialism the role that education plays in giving a sense of normative grounding to the national community and its binding aspirations – national intent - has been a critical factor in developing social cohesion; a central precondition of social justice (Shamsul, 1996).

In terms of higher education arguments that seek to reduce the function of higher education simply to competition and individual advancement (Giroux, 2002) provides us with a shallow basis upon which to understand the dilemmas and challenges facing higher educational institutions and states that need to develop and maintain social cohesion. The importance of the university to the aspirations of national cohesion, and a commitment to the common good is not something that has melted into air with the discourse of globalisation and marketisation. Engagement with the community of which the university is a critical part relies on how we imagine our community, what it is, what it is not, and to whom or what we owe our obligations.

The discourse of community engagement, if it is to be more than a generalisation, needs to be understood in terms of what community is being imagined and what the boundaries of it are.

One of the interesting themes that come through the neo-liberal discourse found in the publications such as those of the World Bank involves the way the nation state and nationalism is framed within a discourse that privileges marketisation, competition and individualism (Bank, 2007; Johnstone, Arora, & Experton, 1998; Wong, 2011) (Collier & Dollar, 2002). The neo-liberal discourse which informs a considerable amount of the vision of the World Bank privileges the unencumbered individual. Advancing community engagement in this kind of framework is usually based on liberal notions of expanding opportunities based on a liberal conception of merit increasing opportunities for individuals rather than building solidarities and mutuality.

As scholars and administrators in universities our philosophical commitment to community through care and regard for each other, is at root a spiritual exercise which generates or forms of practice: soul-craft and statecraft (Hadot, 1998). Viewing community engagement, the act of mutuality as a form of 'spiritual practice' or 'exercise' entails an emphasis on issues of bonding to community as commitment to a moral form of life rather than just viewing the community as a recipient of welfare or judging the success or failure of community engagement simply by quantitative metrics (Sama & Shoaf, 2008).

However neoliberal theory when applied to debate over higher education suffers very little regard for problems of 'social cohesion', 'collective identity' and 'boundaries' (Calhoun, 2007, p.154). The arguments of neo-liberals in regards to the nation state and local issues of social inclusion and bonding radically underestimate the importance and centrality of the nation state (Weiss, 1997, 2003, 2005) to development and social cohesion (Levin, 2001b; Moiseyenko, 2005; Stanley, 2003) and the critical importance of nation states to address the real problems of horizontal inequality and national cohesion. Craig Calhoun writes:

'we need to break with the ideology of an abstract market and see global markets–even those in arcane derivatives and those managed in part by computerised trading programmes – as relationships among actors: people, places, institutions (including states)' (Calhoun, 2008, p.112).

Education as statecraft is the key to national modernisation and development. However education as soulcraft provides the basis for the inculcation of values, mores and moral dispositions that are crucial for the development and realisation of cultural independence and maintenance of deeply held cultural, spiritual and social values which are the markers of genuine independence. In an environment where the contemporary discourse is largely dominated by talk of globalisation and the diminution and transcendence of national loyalties and identities the importance of higher education to the building an inclusive national community can sometimes be missed.

Social solidarity based on and informed by a shared respect for and understanding of a common history and a shared respect for the institutions forged from shared history is the basis for our efforts at moral transformation, social justice ad inclusiveness. Advancing ethical commitments through educational institutions to extend human betterment and social justice occurs in the context of a strong commitment by a national community which is defined by its sense of location and shared experience. The educational institutions through which we express and realise our bonds of national community and our sense of commitment and obligation to each other are a practical and material way in which our imaginings of community in all its dimensions are made manifest.

The grounding of our lives and practices of citizenship within institutions is the framework for our ability to comprehend and internalise commitments to the common good. One of the most important forces of institutionalisation of life is the nation. It through our commitment to the common good, understood through our commitments to a national mission and sense of mutual

obligation that engagement with community finds critical support. Membership of a nation and sense of community within it presents a counter or balance and is buffeted by the modern forces of pluralisation, secularisation and subjectivisation which characterise current modern life (Berger, 1967, 1990, 1999).

Strong dedicated higher educational institutions with a firm sense of civic national commitment help to situate our moral and political obligations. Firstly a sense of national identity and belonging places value on a commonly held ideal: the nation state and the national project. Secondly a sense of inclusive civic nationalism and commitment to the national project suggests that there are allegiances that are more important and transcendent than those that simply benefit the individual. Finally, commitment to a national project bonds individuals in action and commitments that are not merely subjective or individualistic but rather rest on inter-subjective allegiances and loyalties. Nations and the sinews of belonging to nations also act as a counter to the way in which constantly changing stimuli at the social level such as found through the media and ICT is distorting and breaking down bonds of mutual obligation.

The ways in which national direction is institutionalised in society (for example through education and formal schooling) can provide (along with the religious and spiritual dimension) a way of grounding life in a set of meanings and allegiances that neither are mere individual caprice nor manipulated by constantly changing social spectacles and stimulations. Loyalties and obligations to the nation are an important way in which people imagine themselves in community. The important sinews of a nation are a sense of common history and a shared understanding of this.

It is the nation as a socially cohesive entity which provides the basis of an ethos of inclusion and a binding sense of social solidarity and mutual recognition which is the basis of commitments to social justice and inclusivity. The imaginings of community the bonds of national obligation and responsibility ground our ethical project. Visions of the common good are articulated within broad national projects (imaginings) which are grounded in the practices of institutions. Integration into the norms and values of a nation/community through the institutions and practices of higher education is of central importance to problems of social cohesion and the development of national aspirations as well as to how the common good is grasped and pursued.

Engagement as responsibility

The state has responsibilities in higher education which are not limited to improving competition or market position and are deeply related to building and protecting the national aspirations of its people. This remains so despite the arguments of neo-liberals and advocates of convergence and globalisation in higher education. Education is a key institutional conduit for the state to realise its policies of national integration, social cohesion and social-economic development. For example in plural horizontally unequal societies where a sense of contestation and conflict between contending ethnic groups is compounded by economic inequality along ethnic lines the role of state institutions, especially educational institutions is to find ways to help build respect for the central and defining symbols of the nation, address horizontal inequality and leverage from this to the building of a sustainable civic consciousness that develops from addressing and recognising these issues. Andy Green makes the following observation:

'as the centrifugal forces of globalisation relentlessly disrupt and fragment societies, governments simply cannot afford to exempt education systems from their responsibilities for promoting social cohesion. There are no other public agencies left which can do it' (Green, 2003, pp. 86-87).

Critically developed virtues are the grounds for a sense of belonging to a national community and social cohesion. Grounded community both provides a sense of limit to projects of the common good and a sense of some practical boundaries. Critically for those interested in advancing an idea of the common good through education the sense of belonging to a nation is a central and critical anchor. However a sense of national belonging is ultimately informed by a set of deeper values and norms which help constitute the moral architecture of national identity and belonging. Concern with others is in the Aristotelian sense the foundation point for our idea of the common good. Other regarding sentiment, concern for others is the base point for our notion of the common good and a grounding concept in our concept of virtue.

Cultivating our sentiments and regard for each other is the critical grounding upon which a commitment to the common good is based. The practice of reflecting upon this is following the argument of Pierre Hadot a 'spiritual exercise' (Hadot, 1998). In other words the act of considering the 'we' the 'us' involves an act of dethroning the self and is in its classical sense an exercise in spiritual reflective action or praxis. If a national community is to be informed by values of the common good and commitment to each other the significance of the bonds of mutuality, obligation and sense of belonging are crucial aspects of the moral ecology that justifies universities engaging the broader community. The spiritual dimension to this is often underrated or eclipsed by discourses that either dismiss the spiritual aspect of life as purely private or concurrently view the spiritual as irrelevant to knowledge, especially knowledge understood as economic knowledge.

Conclusion

The core argument in respect to the position of this paper is the recognition that nations and the commitment to an imagined moral community provide the background structures and sinews upon which actually existing democracy and socially just policies have found support. The ideologies and objectives pursued under the rubric of neo-liberal reform to higher education exist in tension with the needs of a nation state to maintain and ground a sense of belonging and identification with the common good. Defining and understanding the importance of statecraft as soulcraft in regards to serving and engaging the community needs elaboration. Universities being involved with the broader community of which they are a part draws its binding and motivating legitimacy from the important role that universities have in advancing social cohesion, and advancing a grounded conception of the common good (Levin, 2001a) and moral community. Advancing the common good and developing knowledge to serve and advance this good involves an understanding of the philosophical and practical engagement with community as a form of spiritual exercise (soulcraft). The central importance that universities can play in building a sense of social cohesion, inclusivity and national community is what must inform the overall way that universities view community engagement. Understanding this may help to put the soul back in universities.

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