



ACADEMIC LIFE AND LABOUR IN THE NEW UNIVERSITY

Hope and Other Choices

RUTH BARCAN

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Ruth Barcan, University of Sydney, Australia

What does it mean to be an academic today? What kinds of experiences do students have, and how are they affected by what they learn? Why do so many students and their teachers feel like frauds? Can we learn to teach and research in ways that foster hope and deflate pretension? *Academic Life and Labour in the New University: Hope and Other Choices* addresses these big questions, discussing the challenges of teaching and researching in the contemporary university, the purpose of research and its fundamental value, and the role of the academy against the background of major changes to the nature of the university itself.

Drawing on a range of international media sources, political discourse and many years of professional experience, this volume explores approaches to teaching and research, with special emphasis on the importance of collegiality, intellectual honesty and courage. With attention to the intersection of large-scale institutional changes and intellectual shifts such as the rise of transdisciplinarity and the development of a pluralist curriculum, this book proposes the pursuit of more ethical, compassionate and critical forms of teaching and research. As such, it will be of interest not only to scholars of cultural studies and education, but to all those who care about the fate of the university as an institution, including young scholars seeking to join the academy.

A deeply affecting book that will speak to the experiences of all precarious, time-pressured and surveilled academics who have found that working in the Academy is not what they expected. Ruth Barcan offers us both a powerful critique of life in the contemporary University, and a politics of hope that other, better ways are possible.

Rosalind Gill, King's College London, UK

Finally a book with the patience and perspective to explain the reality of work in the university today. Against the current regime of myopic productivity, Ruth Barcan offers her colleagues a vision of humility and hope. It is a vitalism that emerges when academics focus on the place that still matters and promises most: the classroom.

Melissa Gregg, University of California, Irvine, USA

Balanced, lucid and scrupulously enquiring, this is the best book I have read about the forces shaping everyday life in the new university and the dilemmas confronting teachers, researchers and students. Firmly based in the experience of work, Barcan's case for an ethics that does not leave us stranded between despair and resignation gives those of us who still value academic life good grounds for hope indeed.

Meaghan Morris, University of Sydney, Australia

Cover photograph courtesy of Cath Barcan.

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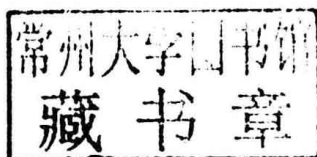


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ACADEMIC LIFE AND LABOUR IN THE
NEW UNIVERSITY

*For my father, Alan Barcan,
Who believes in universities*



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The cartoon in Chapter 4 – a long-time favourite of mine – is reproduced with the kind permission of Brad Veley.

The final thanks go to my family – wonderful teachers all. This book is dedicated to them and, most especially, to my father Alan Barcan, a good man, a careful scholar and a quiet and loving teacher.



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Introduction: Private Feelings, Public Contexts

‘... Churchill formulated accurately the mood of his countrymen and, formulating it, mobilized it by making it a public possession, a social fact, rather than a set of disconnected, unrealized private emotions’.

Clifford Geertz, ‘Ideology as a Cultural System’ (1973): 232

Introduction

When I am at work, silent, sinister faces glare down at me. Perhaps many people know the feeling, but these scary workplace presences are in my case a sign of privilege – part of an honoured iconography. For the grotesque faces are sandstone gargoyles, chimeras and dragons perched on the roof of a university quadrangle. A piece of colonial mimicry, they are part of an architectural iconography that ties my Australian university to the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, and beyond that to the abbeys and monasteries of medieval Europe. In so doing, they tie it to a particular *idea* of the university: that of the university as the custodian of ‘a wisdom, safe from the excesses and vagaries of individuals’ (Newman 1976: 15). This is the dream of a university as solid and stable as the stone faces themselves, the embodiment and guarantor of the stability and continuity of ‘deep-rooted European intellectual unity’ and intellectual freedom (Dunbabin 1999: 32). As Cardinal Newman put it in his seminal tract *The Idea of a University*, a series of lectures written between 1852 and 1858 to support the establishment of a Catholic university in Dublin, universities are ‘institutions which have stood the trial and received the sanction of ages’ (15).

The Oxford ideal that inspired Newman¹ is, some would say, a ‘liability’ in the current era (Tight 2009: 7), where its lofty universal claims are contested and the social ground that made it possible has fractured. Nonetheless, this ideal ‘remains an immensely strong – if slowly diminishing – influence’ (Tight 2009: 7) in the British higher education system and beyond. Even in Australia, the idea of an unbroken chain from Sydney to Oxbridge² to medieval Europe

1 Newman was linked to two Oxford colleges for nearly thirty years: first as a student at Trinity College, then as a fellow and later a tutor at Oriel College.

2 This term, formed from an amalgamation of ‘Oxford’ and ‘Cambridge’, dates from the mid-nineteenth century and connotes something of the privilege of these two

is emotionally, and economically, powerful. At some Australian universities, it is made manifest architecturally, in cloisters, towers and quadrangles. In many more, it is embodied, literally, in the staff profile, for in the 1970s many Australian universities met the sudden need for an expanded academic workforce by hiring young graduates from the UK, often from Oxford and Cambridge (Hugo 2005: 329–30). The glory days of Oxbridge-in-Australia are fading fast. The newer universities of steel and glass outnumber the so-called ‘sandstones’,³ and the generation of UK scholars who arrived in the 1970s will soon be retiring. Nonetheless, in the popular imagination at least, the Oxbridge model can still sometimes stand in for the broader idea and experience of university education itself, and even those students unfamiliar with, alienated by, or resistant to its histories, hierarchies and privileges might still feel something of its pull. For there is something very powerful and enticing in this vision of a world at once fanciful and venerable – of academics in caps and gowns, carillons ringing out graduations, champagne corks popping in cloisters and quadrangles, vehement discussions on lawns, and student pranks, rituals and demonstrations. But all this is not just iconography, for these symbols and practices are attached to a world of ideas and to communities of people. So these picturesque relics symbolize a more substantial invitation: to participate in lineages of thought and ideals of inquiry, and to join both a particular cohort of students and a more expansive community of former students and generations of thinkers past. This, then, is why the iconography continues to resonate despite the contemporary diversity of universities and fields of study, the variety of backgrounds of students and staff, and the crisis of faith that has prompted public debates on the identity, and the very future, of the university as an institution.

Today, gaining professional entry into this world is at once easier and more difficult than it ever was. Easier, in the sense that academia is now open to, and welcoming of, a far broader cross-section of the population than was ever the case, including women, people of colour, and people from working-class backgrounds. Harder, though, because the days of getting a permanent academic job with a good first degree are long gone, academic work is increasingly casualized, and the pool of people who might aspire to an academic job has expanded alongside substantial growth in the higher education system. In

institutions as a type of bloc.

3 This is the Australian ‘equivalent’ to the American ‘Ivy League’. Sandstone refers to the material out of which a number of Australia’s earlier universities, for example, the University of Sydney, were constructed, but the term ‘sandstone universities’ is used more broadly to denote Australia’s older (i.e. pre-World War One) universities, not all of which were actually made of that stone. As only six of Australia’s 39 universities are known under this term, it implies prestige and history.

contemporary Western universities, acquiring an academic job almost inevitably means acquiring a PhD, so the question of undertaking postgraduate study and the hopes for a life thereafter are thoroughly intertwined.

Perhaps some of those students who aspire to join Newman's 'assemblage of learned men' (1976: 95) are unaware of the extent to which the powerful modern idea of a university, and the types of practices it enabled, are under threat. So much of academic work is, after all, invisible – occurring in closed offices, at home, on planes, in meeting rooms and conferences – that it is still possible for outsiders, and even students, to imagine that lecturers⁴ spend their days writing, teaching and discoursing eruditely with their colleagues. Di Adams reports that there is 'a mismatch between the expectations of new academics (the myths of the academy) and the reality they experience in the academic workplace' (2000: 65).

In the past, students aiming to become an academic might have doubts about their own abilities, but they would have been unlikely to have doubts about whether the university itself was a viable institution, nor if the life they might find within it would be a sustainable one. They would have been unlikely to question too deeply the value or pleasure of the life the university offers, only their own fitness to enter it. Today, though, those who are actively trying to break into it know it to be riddled with contradictions – undeniably privileged, but fraught, fractured and pressured. Newman's categorical vision of the university as 'a place of *teaching universal knowledge*' (1976: ix, original italics) is a far cry from the deep uncertainty or divisions around the university's mission today. As Bill Readings notes at the beginning of his incisive book *The University in Ruins*, the university is under assault from both the outside and the inside: an 'external legitimization crisis' meets an internal, intellectual, 'legitimation struggle' (1996: 1–2). Governments want many different things from universities, and universities themselves scarcely know what they are and whom they are to serve.⁵ This public uncertainty has bred a certain personal and professional disquiet. According to Sue Clegg, there is, in fact, a 'crisis of faith' among academics, many of whom have 'discovered that the university life was not what they had expected or bargained for' (2003: 10). The palpability of this uncertainty can be illustrated by an excerpt from the concluding essay

4 I use this term in the British and Australian sense of someone who holds a (usually tenured) position at a university. It does not imply, as it can in the US, an academic without research responsibilities and/or tenure. I also use 'Professor' in the Australian sense, to refer not to all academic staff as in the US and Canada, but only to the most senior academic rank.

5 To take just one example, the *New York Review of Books*, the Humanities Initiative, and the Institute for Public Knowledge co-organized a conference in New York in 2011 titled *Who and What are Universities For?*

to a contemporary collection of essays on university pedagogy, in which the university has been transmogrified from Newman's 'universal idea' (Ker 1999: 11) into a shifting scene:

The learning landscape is a restless place. Constantly shifting and resettling, erupting, changing, evolving. Its topography has undoubtedly been fundamentally shaped and reshaped by government, but its inhabitants continue to build on difficult terrain, supporting educational communities that are the foundations on which everything else relies. (Locker 2009: 139)

Academic Life and Labour in the New University represents the culmination of my attempts, over more than a decade, to wrestle with these big questions from inside this 'difficult terrain'. What, it asks, does it mean to enter this world today as a prospective academic, and what does it take for students and staff to work happily, ethically and usefully within it? The book explores some of the intellectual and political issues at stake, as well as some pedagogical and collegial strategies academics might deploy to allow us to thrive within it and to make of the academic profession an inheritance the next generation will want. Can we, I ask, approach the contemporary uncertainty about the nature and purpose of the university, and hence of academic life and work, from a perspective that is emotionally more mature, politically more astute, and ethically more sound than either bearing up or giving up?

Crisis? What Crisis?

Before broaching such questions, it is worth interrogating this current sense of crisis, for some might argue that claims of crisis are overstated and nostalgic. After all, one can trace laments about the decline of the university a long way back in time. Even Newman (1976), in the mid-nineteenth century, considered that the university had lost much of its authority, which he saw as having shifted to the world of journalism, where knowledge was fast-paced, eclectic, and subject to the demands of novelty, economy and fashion. The new media of periodical literature required a ceaseless supply of 'reckless originality' and 'sparkling plausibility' (14) whose temporality and temper were at odds with the systematicity, pace and order required for 'real cultivation of mind' (10). Half a century later and the term 'crisis' was already in use. In 1949, Sir Walter Moberly, a former vice-chancellor⁶ of the University of Manchester and chairman of the University Grants Committee, wrote *The Crisis in the*

6 'Vice-chancellor' is the term used in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Australia and some other Commonwealth countries for the administrative head of the university,

University, a controversial Christian account of the decline in moral training provided by universities and of the contemporary uncertainty about their proper role in society. Moberly was deeply disturbed by the university's failure to believe in and execute its 'former cultural task' (1949: 22): the 'creation, generation by generation in a continuous flow, of a body of men and women who share a sense of civilized values, who feel responsible for developing them, who are united by their culture, and who by the simple pressure of their existence and outlook will form and be enlightened public opinion' (Dobrée, qtd. in Moberly 1949: 22). Over-specialization, utilitarianism, prejudice and petty service provision had come to predominate, and the university was lost 'in a moral and cultural fog' (28).

This by now familiar catalogue of ills might lead us to wonder whether the current malaise is, in effect, a matter of *plus ça change*. The eminent Australian professor Denise Bradley (2011), who chaired the expert panel in a 2008 Federal Government review of the Australian tertiary education sector, is one who claims that change has been a constant part of academia – indeed of *any* workplace – for decades, and that there is in that sense nothing special about the condition of the contemporary university. 'There is nothing unusual about now. It has *always* been this way', she said in a recent keynote address (2011) to young scholars.

The higher education sector did indeed change considerably throughout the twentieth century and the idea of a university changed with it. For some, this was indubitably a good thing. In 1974, the chaplain of King's College, London noted that the 'tremendous expansion' of the British higher education sector in the 1960s meant that 'there are as many different views on the role and purpose of university life as there are different universities!' (Kingsbury 1974: 8). This, for him, was no cause for lament. On the contrary, he greeted the questioning and the diversity provoked by the rapid expansion of the sector as a strength: 'Each new university has added its own contribution to the evolving model of university life. Patterns from the past have not been overthrown; rather, they have been added to' (8).

It is undoubtedly true that both the idea of a university and the structuring of universities into national and international systems are always changing. It is also the case that the pleasures and privileges of academic life continue, even if they are rather more precarious than was once the case and are unevenly distributed across the academic workforce. But in recognizing this dynamism, we must take care not to downplay some of the very real structural and ideological changes of the last few decades, and the intimate experience of the people who have been at the forefront of those changes. One of the questions

who would often be called the Principal or President in Scotland, Canada, Ireland or the US.

I want to ask in this book is whether the kind of summative logic that enthused the College Chaplain (whereby each new model of the university simply *added to* rather than transformed the university as a social institution) is still operating and, if so, whether fifty years on from the boom period he describes, academics as flesh-and-blood people can actually *sustain* the role of holding onto the past while embodying the future. To ask such questions, we cannot simply accuse academics of nostalgic self-interest. Rather, we need to take seriously changes in their social role and workplace life.

Three big shifts – massification, marketization and internationalization – have underpinned and fuelled these changes. In the UK and Australia, the growth to a mass system began in earnest after World War Two and picked up pace in the 1960s. Marketization and internationalization intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. The long-term effect for academic staff of these three big shifts has been a verifiable intensification of work life. Student numbers have continued to grow but staff numbers have not: between 1991 and 1996 the increase in teaching academics in Australia was only half that of 1986 to 1991, and from 1996 to 2001 ‘there was no increase at all in the numbers of teaching academics’ (Hugo 2005: 330). Over the decade from 1990 to 2000, the student-to-staff ratio increased from 12.9 to 18.8 (Winefield et al. 2003: 53). As a consequence, teaching loads in Australian universities rose 46.5 per cent between 1993 and 2003 (Hugo 2005: 330). The teaching role has also expanded via a substantial growth in postgraduate education. Moreover, it has been professionalized, with increased requirements for training and evaluation and an enlarged bureaucratic burden in the form of policy development and documentation. Meanwhile, other pressures have grown, in the form of a greatly expanded role for research, alongside a battery of measures for assessing its quantity and quality and the ‘productivity’ of individual researchers. Responding to a whole host of internal and external accountability mechanisms regarding both teaching and research now constitutes a new and substantial form of academic labour in itself. Alongside these changes, academics as individuals and departments are now also subject to a pressure towards entrepreneurialism.

My argument throughout this book is not that any of these ‘improvements’ is necessarily bad – indeed, a number are to be welcomed with open arms – but that the simple super-adding of requirement after requirement, task after task, has left academics unsure, confused, overburdened and – to put not too fine a point on it – wondering how much more work can be compressed into a week. While it is true that work intensification, casualization and new forms of professionalization are features of most contemporary working lives and not unique to academia, complaints about the intensification of academic work cannot be dismissed as subjective whinging, nor should the impact of work intensification and role confusion on personal wellbeing be dismissed. Workplace and organizational studies repeatedly demonstrate that academics