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The “52 week, 24 hour” University.

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On 7 May 2014 *The Northampton Chronicle & Echo* reported that: *“The University of Northampton has unveiled plans to dispense with the traditional three-month student summer holiday and move towards a “52-week, 24 hour” campus arrangement.”*[1]

The newspaper reports a rather fascinating but potentially disruptive and revolutionary notion . If on the one hand the report of the alleged proposal is factually accurate, in

Kuhnian[2] terms the proposal would amount to as yet undiscovered ‘paradigm to shift’ and one unsustainable by any credible evidence, quite consistent with Kuhnian theory.

If, on the other hand, the *Northampton Chronicle* is reporting an ideological (im)position seeking to articulate an expression of bare power, that is quite a different matter. As we know, statements of belief, especially those ‘religiously’ held as matters of fundamentalist principle, are not by definition capable of rational critique or analysis. Such statements owe their existence and justification to the potentiality and the politico-judicial actuality of pure violence.

As George Monbiot observes, we live in an era of appeasement:

“There has seldom, in the democratic era, been a better time to thrive by appeasing wealth and power, or to fail by sticking to your principles. Politicians who twist and turn on behalf of business are immune to attack. Those who resist are excoriated.” [3]

In itself the proposed new methodology of the ‘delivery’ of higher education experience is not necessarily *per se* defective, assuming that the designers of the new method have a reasoned evidence-based rationale for the proposal and do not offend our shared social and cultural values.

In thinking through the system, we must assume, that intellectual and academic considerations were taken into account, and the evidence was carefully gathered and evaluated. The factors which must have been considered include: 1) the recognition of and compliance with the necessary standards for the higher education's needs and aspirations of students, 2) the recognition of the post-experiential characteristic of higher education, 3) recognition that learning is a lengthy process of intellectual and personal human development involving a considered and often painful process of accumulation and refinement of knowledge, wisdom, creativity, maturity, experiences, excitement, daring, inventiveness, flexibility, academic and life skills.

We are dealing with a plan put forward by a public institution of higher education and, accordingly, we can assume that the proposal for a “52 week, 24 hour campus” university has been rigorously tested in accord with the required academic standards, expectations and protocols. We can assume that the expected high standards of scientific and analytical processes which all undergraduate students at any university are expected to meet would have been applied in this instance.

Furthermore, we must trust that all the relevant public regulatory bodies and stakeholders, including the student body, academic and administrative staff, have been instrumental in promoting the proposed change for a “52 week 24 hour campus”.

We must trust that the general public has been persuaded and more than consulted but has unequivocally expressed its assent to the proposal and agrees that the proposal would deliver improved education to the students ensuring that graduates are better equipped to succeed in their post-university careers. However, the empirical evidence does not support this view. On the contrary, the better view is that university education is generally considered a ‘public good’ [4], meaning that an educated population is of benefit of the whole society.

We would expect that the proposal has been tested against current higher educational values and principles, precedents have been carefully measured and analysed, aims and objectives have been openly debated and critically tested and scientifically examined and tested to ensure that the overall welfare of the community is enhanced.

The trouble is that in absence of any open debate supported by credible pedagogic evidence in support of the proposal to implement a “52 week 24 hour” university it is far too easy to conclude that the proposal is informed solely by neo-liberal economic aims privileging vested financial interests in total disregard of social and academic interests of the students and the wider community any university claims to serve. Moreover there appears to be no credible empirical evidence favouring the proposal.

On the other hand, we have all had the experience of enjoying a meal at McDonald’s at some time in our lives. We may eat there in the knowledge that the food is brought to us quickly, at our demand, in utter defiance of the ebb and flow of nature’s seasons. We expect that the rule-driven standardised routines, processes and production procedures ensure that the food we buy remains insulated from external contingencies, and satisfies our ‘manufactured’ needs and consumer expectations we are trained to believe in. We know we can repeat our experience of consumption at any time of night and day – 52 weeks 24 hours a year quite outside any temporal references and in absence of even disregard of the Other, especially those who serve our needs.

Our senses and feelings, natural human responses, become neutralised by the relentless consistency of the manufactured experience, the totalising blending even of the most fundamental division and subdivision of our temporal being and existence into days, hours and minutes (i.e. time); those moments to look forward to and those others we regret or pity; the experience of being human ceases to contain colour or texture. In short, the loss of our autonomy means transportation into the world of the grey blended bland.

Interestingly McDonald’s has established university called the Hamburger University the ‘McDonald’s Center of Training Excellence’, which trains people to operate in the ‘52 week 24 hour’ culture. The aims of the Hamburger University, are as follows:

McDonald’s Center of Training Excellence

Since its inception, training at Hamburger University has emphasized consistent restaurant operations procedures, service, quality and cleanliness. It has become the company’s global center of excellence for McDonald’s operations training and leadership development.

In 1961, Fred Turner, McDonald’s former senior chairman and Ray Kroc’s first grillman, founded Hamburger University in the basement of a McDonald’s restaurant in Elk Grove Village, Illinois.

- February 24, 1961, Hamburger University’s first class of 15 students graduated
- Today, more than 5,000 students attend Hamburger University each year

- Since 1961, more than 80,000 restaurant managers, mid-managers and owner/operators have graduated from this facility

At McDonald's, our training mission is to be the best talent developer of people with the most committed individuals to Quality, Service, Cleanliness and Value (QSC&V) in the world. Our strong commitment to the training and development of our People has resulted in many "firsts" and honors, including being...

- The first restaurant company to develop a global training center
- The only active QSR currently to receive college credit recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE), the United States' oldest and most recognized unifying body for higher education
- Continually recognized for excellence in training

Our founder Ray Kroc once said, "If we are going to go anywhere, we've got to have talent. And, I'm going to put my money in talent." Hamburger University continues to promote that philosophy, everyday.[5]

The McDonald's example indicates that for "*the world's largest chain of hamburger fast food restaurants, serving around 68 million customers daily in 119 countries*"[6], a quasi-university of its own creation educates students to efficiently internalise the idea of "*52 week, 24 hour*" convenience consumer culture. The aim seems to be to normalise the exceptional economic needs of the business such that natural human endeavour and the spirit of enquiry efficiently serve generation of profit.

The question we need to ask is whether the McDonald's educational model, predicated on notions of the market and neo-liberal orthodoxy, dedicated to promoting the economic interests of business and the accumulation of money, arguably at the expense of the rights to human creativity and autonomy, has the capacity in fact to promote the general public good, including for instance the spirit of democracy, rule of law, and a more equal and fairer society.

The manifestation of the neo-liberal assault on the deeply shared value of universities as public good, include rising tuition fees, increasing student debt and the global commodification of learning [7].

However, despite the persistent ideologically informed attempts by the market to reconfigure higher education as a public cost paid for by the mythical tax payer, it seems that the public continue to value higher education as a public good [8]. A cost that, the ideologues argue, should not be borne by the public purse because over a life time a graduate student has the personal benefit of enhanced earnings. Put this way we can immediately spot the fundamental flaw in this justification: the flaw is to ignore the possibility of social and the reduction of human relations to monetised transactions.

Moreover, assuming, that our public universities remain loyal to their founding principle of spirit and reason for existence as a 'public good' of higher education, encompassing ideas of the interdependency of social and personal benefits attendant upon the education and cultural development of the next generation of our young people.

And, assuming that our universities continue to maintain at least some degree of structural and intellectual independence in face of the immense ideological pressures of finance capitalism and have not as yet quite succumbed to the myths of 'shareholder value', buttressed by the ideals of maximisation financial return and profit, and the economic myths of dematerialised global corporations, but maintain as their purpose wider social, pedagogic and communal functions and democratic purposes, it must logically follow that universities are more than places of "*consistent... operations procedures, service, quality and cleanliness.*" Places beyond

“global center[s] of excellence for...[capital] operations training and leadership development.” demanded by any global capital operation.

In the circumstances it would appear that the reported proposal to establish a “52 week, 24 hour” university may be a symptom of the attempted homogenisation and denaturing of the public good value of universities by neo-liberal orthodoxy.

Sadly, the only example we have of an institution dedicated to the service of a global corporation is Hamburger university. Unfortunately, this university does not seem to offer transformative opportunities for intellectual and personal development of students and its communities, nor offer subjects for study beyond being the “global center of excellence for...operations training and leadership development.”

In the circumstances, it is difficult to envisage how the ‘52 week, 24 hour’ university would be able to provide a full and varied range of educational experience and personal intellectual development to a wide range of students and their communities.

Footnotes:

[1] ‘University of Northampton unveils plans for ‘52 week, 24 hour’ campus with no three-month summer holiday.’ *The Northampton Chronicle & Echo* 7 May 2014 available at: <http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/education/university-of-northampton-unveils-plans-for-52-week-24-hour-campus-with-no-three-month-summer-holiday-1-6041446>

[2] Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), 3rd Edition 1996. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

[3] George Monbiot ‘Land of Impunity’ (5 May 2014) Available at <http://www.monbiot.com/2014/05/05/land-of-impunity-2/> And published in *The Guardian* 6 May 2014.

[4] For instance see the study by Mountford-Zimbars *et al* which examined the British Social Attitudes Surveys from the last thirty years and found that “a persistent belief in the core values of Higher Education” as a public good. Anna Mountford-Zimbars *et al* (2013) ‘Framing higher education: questions and responses in the British Social Attitudes survey, 1983-2010’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (34, 5-06) pp 792-811.

[5] See http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/corporate_careers/training_and_development/hamburger_university.htm Note the use of acronyms as mimicry to give the statement simulated academic credibility in fact only helping to peddle anti-intellectual obscurantism.

[6] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McDonald%27s> McDonald’s says that “[It] is the world’s leading global food service retailer with more than 35,000 locations in more than 100 countries each day.” http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/our_company/mcdonalds_system.html

[7] Steven Jones & Anna Mountford-Zimdars ‘University as a ‘public good’? Only for those who never went...’ *LSE British Politics and Policy Blog* (4 October 2013) (Available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/36638>)

[8] Anna Mountford-Zimbars *et al* (2013) ‘Framing higher education: questions and responses in the British Social Attitudes survey, 1983-2010’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (34, 5-06) pp 792-811.

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