

COMMENT: THE SONG, NOT THE SINGER

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PREAMBLE

In any post-presentational comment, there are basically two ways of doing things. First, to comment on the particular interpretations contained therein. Or, to comment in what may be seen as a historiographical mode, namely to dwell less on what is said than on the light cast upon the field of study itself. In short one has the choice to pay attention – in this case, homage – to the Singer, or to take a wider view and attend to the Song, that is, to the state of the art. In this case the latter is the field of Access itself. How do perceptions and scholarship more generally mould, shape and hopefully advance our knowledge in this particular sub-domain of the study of higher education?

There are three constant dimensions in Access studies:

- The institutional perspective: What type of establishment provides higher education?
- The participatory perspective: Who is going, or not going, to higher education? And finally,
- The epistemological perspective: What is being learned and taught? What content and knowledge are purveyed?

A rarer sub-category of access is of course the access of different types of knowledge to formal institutions of higher learning.

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Dr. García Guadilla hones in on the first, that is, the institutional perspective. Her paper is essentially taken up with what, in the inimitable jargon of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, would be termed 'Provision': What is provided and on offer in terms of institutional variety and modes of delivery? The paper focuses on the expanding range and variety of institutions 'coming onto the market', and hers is effectively an account of the evolution of very particular structures in higher education, their spatial outreach, their location and the ties between their seating in one region and their operating location (very often) in another. This is a very special view, and one that is acknowledged in the title. We are treated to that sub-field within access, which deals with the burgeoning aspects of globalization and the rise of a global market for higher education services. Globalization or its more respectable twin, internationalization, stand at this moment at the centre of the hopes of some and the disquiet of many.

IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

One of the more pronounced features of globalization is its indissoluble ties with what is known here in France as 'ultra-liberalism' – essentially the unfettered right of those individuals who can afford it to buy and sell whatever they may, and to consume to their heart's content or their pocket's depth. If students – ever more diverse as the years pass – are lumped together as 'consumers', it is not surprising that the main interest of those able to consume is what is available for consumption. And, more to the point, how much they are going to have to pay for their appetites. Thus when studies focus on the spread of those vehicular forms and establishments of higher education, whether symbolic or real expressions of globalization, it is not surprising that the consumerist perspective takes the upper hand: What is newly available, and on what terms? Thus attention dwells on 'new providers', 'alternative forms' that are emerging on the higher education landscape.

THREE DIMENSIONS IN 'RE-CONTEXTUALIZATION'

What causes their emergence and the underlying forces behind them, involves a quite massive exercise in 're-contextualization' – to use a hideous neologism much cherished by certain schools of sociology. Re-contextualization brings a number of interesting features with it. Some of them are not greatly novel, either. Since the days of Pierre Abélard, '*... pour qui fut châtre et puis moine Pierre Abélard à*

Saint-Denys ...' as the medieval French wastrel François Villon reminds us, higher education has long been prey to the fashions of this world. *Amor scientiae* as against *amor pecuniae*, higher education as learning and the means of collective improvement versus higher education as training and source of profit for some is a very old theme. It is almost as ancient as the 'international dimension' itself.

There are other elements in the unwitting, and in some cases not so unwitting, process of re-contextualization. Technological determinism is one. In formulaic terms, internationalization can be boiled down to the proposition, 'higher education equals learning plus information and communications technology'. This is not greatly different from another slogan that hailed from an earlier era, 'communism equals the Soviets plus electricity', which was Lenin's way of harnessing historical inevitability to the service of what was then a new order in the making.

Another element in re-contextualization is more subtle. It involves concentrating attention wholly and exclusively on the progress achieved by new forms – whether entrepreneurial, lucrative, virtual, distance or franchise. The claim to progress, demand and success is of course not greatly difficult to make when such examples start from scratch. And it is a simple thing indeed to enhance the notion of inevitability by comparing time to growth rates – whether institutional forms, numbers enrolling (this is a rarer dimension) or the rising potential for money to be made, as against the situation in Year Zero. The statistics are always satisfyingly spectacular. And when projected forward in straight-line extrapolations over the next 10 to 20 years, they yield prospects of a speculative order that defy the imagination. But that does not mean that what is projected will come to pass, though it does allow hope to base itself on an apparently objective calculus. What we may learn from the recent history and experience of the enduring and unfashionable sector of higher education over the past 40 years or so is that extrapolations are fine for political mobilization, for the generation of instant enthusiasm and unseemly hype. What eventual reality they correspond to, however, is almost always coincidental.

SELF-REFERRING STATEMENTS AND STRANGE OMISSIONS

The other feature which the study of Access in the international higher education market brings with it is no less methodologically puzzling. That is its self-referring nature. What is not referred to, nor for that matter examined as a contrastive parallel, is what is happening on

the same criteria in main-line provision. This is a grave oversight from a methodological standpoint, and also leads to an impression that can only be qualified as disproportionate. And this is allied, so I believe, to the need to prove success or to strengthen the impression that established structures are either inadequate or not up to the task – on the basis that if they were, there would be no need for alternative forms. Absence of contrasting proportion is allied to another insidious and implicit assumption – insidious *because* implicit – that because the organizational forms and their technology are new, what they are doing and how they do it is exclusive to the virtual, the digital and the self-styled entrepreneurial.

THE ‘LEARNING UNIVERSITY’ IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT

This is not wholly true. Old, mainstream universities learn, and if the experiments of the ‘alternative providers’ have lasting benefit and impact, which has yet to be definitely proven, there is nothing on earth to prevent the old and established from overhauling themselves. Then, of course, the vexatious question rears its ugly head: Which of the providers, ancient or modern, does a better job? In this so far we remain very much in the dark. It is time we knew.

Dr. García Guadilla has given us a species of map, rather a medieval map, one without the vital relief or precise dimensionality of performance and quality which nowadays determine the fate of universities old and new. Strangely, there seems to be reluctance amongst the ‘new providers’ to submit themselves to the rigours of the national authorities in whose back yards they ply their trade. But in drawing this map for us Dr. García Guadilla has performed a useful first service. She has showed us what we need to do to make this map a true instrument for navigating the often tortuous channels between global market and international and regional cooperation. For this we owe her our gratitude.