

Beyond the “Postmodern University”^{*}

Claire Donovan

Abstract

As an institution, the “postmodern university” is central to the canon of today’s research on higher education policy. Yet in this essay I argue that the postmodern university is a fiction that frames and inhibits our thinking about the future university. To understand why the postmodern university is a fiction, I first turn to grand theory and ask whether we can make sense of the notion of “post”-postmodernity. Second, I turn to the UK higher education sector and show that the postmodern university is a chimera, a modern artefact of competing instrumentalist, gothic, and postmodernist discourses. Third, I discuss competing visions of the future university and find that the progressive (yet modernist) agendas that re-imagine the public value of knowledge production, transmission, and contestation, are those that can move us beyond the palliative and panacea of the postmodern university.

^{*} Health Economics Research Group, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UK. Email: claire.donovan@brunel.ac.uk.

In this essay I investigate the idea of the postmodern university, an institution that is central to research on, and debate about, higher education policy.¹ I contend that the postmodern university does not actually exist, yet this fiction casts a shadow over discussions of higher education policy that inhibits more lateral and creative thinking about the future university. In order to properly investigate the concept of the postmodern, it is first necessary to explain the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity. I then ask if we can make sense of being “beyond” postmodernity to prove that postmodernity has never, in fact, existed. This analysis is extended to the postmodern university, which despite its importance to contemporary debate, is similarly found to be a mirage. I conclude that postmodern (or decentred) theory and normative (modernist) preferences allow us to move beyond the postmodern university and, in terms of public value, to re-imagine the teaching, research, and cultural roles of the future university.

Postmodernism vs. Postmodernity

For the purpose of this discussion, “postmodernism” and “postmodernity” take on very different meanings, and the essential point is their difference.² While I am content with following Jean-François Lyotard’s broad dictum— “I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives”³—as we might expect, there are myriad alternative complex and contested definitions of *postmodernism*. As Anne Griffin puts it, we find that “The term resists full definition since its major thrust is to recognize that all knowledge claims are partial, local and specific.”⁴ For example, postmodernism may be defined as “a rejection of universal and transcendental foundations of knowledge and thought, and a heightened awareness of the significance of language, discourse, and socio-cultural locatedness in the making of any knowledge claim,” which entails that “hierarchies of meaning are hard if not possible to identify.”⁵ And definitions of postmodernism can lead to closure, “closure of

meaning, partly due to a desire to dominate and control,” or to openness, “By recognizing difference, our own ways of thinking are opened up.”⁶

We may say that these definitions reveal competing ideas or “traditions” of what postmodernism is.⁷ But given this multiplicity of interpretations, can we (or should we) produce a coherent set (or sets) of definitions? This is entirely possible by asking what supposedly incommensurable “traditions” of postmodernism do share in common, and by seeking family resemblances between competing narratives to provide a “fusion of horizons.”⁸ We find that the most obvious family resemblances are a shared concern with difference, diversity, and fragmentation: “*difference*, perhaps the most famous of postmodern terms. Difference, multiplicity, variety, diversity within and between human beings and the social practices they engage in: these are what postmodernists celebrate.”⁹ This fusion of horizons creates an “opening up” rather than a “closing down” by providing a normative, progressive goal for social and political enquiry: “By recognizing difference, our own ways of thinking are opened up; the new understandings achieved might help us see what we want or need to change.”

Rather than “postmodernism,” the concept of *postmodernity*, defined as a distinct historical era, is the focus of this essay; and this may be understood in three alternative ways. First, there is the idea of a logic of western historical development that moves from pre-modern to modern to postmodern times. Postmodernity is viewed as a stage in history, defined by its rejection of modernist certainties (or metanarratives) such as empiricist knowledge claims and rigid social hierarchies, in favour of social, cultural and scientific relativism. This view implies that postmodernity may, in turn, give way to a new historical phase. Second, there is the view that postmodernity is ahistorical: the postmodern condition is one that is fractured from history, so that the laws of historical development no longer apply. Third, the notion that postmodernity represents the “end of history” and all that is left for

historical development to be complete is the global outworking of the free market economy and liberal democracy.¹⁰

So is it true that we have moved from premodern to modern to postmodern times? Is this a historical fact or one of a range of possible narratives? If we are in the postmodern era, does this mean that any supposed rules of history that brought us here no longer apply? And can we make sense of the idea of “post”-postmodernity?

Beyond Postmodernity

To further develop these three viewpoints in terms of whether there can be a “post”-postmodern era, we can begin with the idea of a logic of historical development. From a Hegelian perspective, there are clearly defined historical epochs, although these can only be recognized retrospectively. An era needs to pass before we can recognize its existence, hence knowledge of the historical condition in which we live may only be gained retrospectively. As Hegel famously put it:

A further word on the subject of *issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be: philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. . . . When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.¹¹

In terms of phases of history, we may only know what has been, but not where we currently are located, or what is to come in the future. Philosophers (or social science or humanities scholars) cannot be prescriptive as they can only understand historical forces with hindsight. This entails that we do not know if we are living in postmodern times nor if we will live in

postmodern times, until this epoch has come about and then passed,¹² and so we can only retrospectively know how postmodern times are characterized. The possibility of a “post”-postmodern era cannot be ruled out, although we do not presently know if we are, or will ever be, in a postmodern epoch.¹³

The Hegelian view of historical development follows a dialectical path where each era is in part a negation and an advancement of the previous one. Yet there is no ultimate historical goal or destination to arrive at, unlike in a Marxian theory of history which culminates in the global transition to a socialist utopia.¹⁴ The Marxist position presents us with two alternatives. First, that we have passed from the pre-modern to the modern era, and are currently located in late-modernity, which is characterized by the accelerated class conflict and alienation that is produced by the private ownership of property and capital. The process of historical development is, from a Marxist perspective, fuelled by technological innovation and class struggle, which can only be resolved by the shared ownership of the means of production. This entails that a socialist utopia (not “postmodernity”) will be the next and final phase of history. Alternatively, if we currently live in “postmodernity,” it is a kind of “hypermodernity” where contradictions, alienation and uncertainty are at their extreme, which would suggest that there can be a “post”-postmodernity in the form of the inevitable post-capitalist socialist utopia.

As for the view that postmodernity is ahistorical because the modernist grand-narrative of historical progress has broken down and is no longer applicable, it follows that there is no further teleological development or next historical stage, and hence there can be no “post”-postmodernity. The same applies to the third view, according to which the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and collapse of communism marked the advent of “postmodernity” or “late modernity,” thus bringing us to the “end of history” with no further goal beyond the “civilizing” spread of the free market and liberal democracy to all societies. It again follows

that, if history has ended, there can be no further stages of history and so no “post”-postmodernity.

How can we establish any of these diverse theories of historical development as fact? Should we take a leaf out of the postmodernists’ book and say that these are all competing knowledge claims, none more privileged than the other? Rather, I want to maintain that there is a danger in accepting any one (or all) of these historical narratives because of a feature they hold in common: the “family resemblance” of “fatalism,” be it the inability to analyse current times and predict future ones, the belief in historical determinism, according to which we cannot change the status quo, or the impasse of relativism. All of these positions are blinkered to the possibilities of being “beyond” postmodernity, which impasse entails apathy about which current social conditions are contestable and not just given.

I argue that we do not live in postmodern times, but are located in post-industrial society or late modernity, or what is variously called high modernity, hypermodernity, liquid modernity, reflexive modernity, and second modernity.¹⁵ So from the perspective of high modernism, “postmodernity” is a fiction that represents a theoretical fracturing and that offers “no way out” and so encourages intellectual and political apathy. For example, social contradictions or inequalities are viewed as playful postmodern ironies, yet these mask very real social inequities and the need to propose public policy solutions. One case in point, which will give some practical grounding to these theoretical debates, is, of course, the “postmodern university.”

Constructing the Postmodern University

The (mostly UK-centric) literature dedicated to the “postmodern university” provides a shared narrative of the evolution of the university, which follows the logic of western historical development.¹⁶ Over time, the university has been held to exhibit key defining

features bound, in turn, to the pre-modern, modern, late-modern, and “postmodern” eras (Table 1).¹⁷

Table 1. Narrating the University by Eras

	Key Features
Pre-modern	Doctrinal truth; cloistered; students as administrative and “professional” elites
Modern	“Fallible truth”; Enlightenment; academic freedom; “preservation of high culture”; students as “professional” and administrative/aristocratic elites
Late-modern	Objective truth; technocracy; research and teaching function; meritocracy
Postmodern	Rejection of authoritative knowledge; no grand organizing principle; heterogeneity; “massification”; students as consumers; economic instrumentalism; managerialism

This narrative suggests that the main function of the pre-modern western university, from the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, was to teach “doctrinal truth”¹⁸ under the Scholastic method, where “human reason was subordinate to biblical truth.”¹⁹ With its monastic roots and cloistered from the wider world, the pre-modern university quickly expanded when “higher education [was] required for administration in the church, secular states, and municipalities, as well as for the traditional ‘professions’.”²⁰

The modern university evolved in the nineteenth century and represented a cultural shift away from Scholasticism to the (Protestant) Enlightenment and individual reasoning.

Rather than being the recipients of doctrinal truth, “fallible truth” could now be freely contested, debated and interpreted by students and scholars.²¹ And so the modern university values “humanism” by underlining the importance of “the individual, free will, and values.”²² The modern university also took shape through its response to industrialization and modernization, so that one of its roles was to “preserve the high culture against the onslaughts of modernity—not as an escape from modernity but as a critical engagement with it.”²³ So while “the training role for the expanding governing elite was greatly intensified,” the emphasis remained on “values and cultural appreciation over vocational skills and training.”²⁴

The late-modern university emerged in the postwar era, notably during the 1960s, when the state and higher education became intimately linked.²⁵ As Krishan Kumar puts it, “universities were brought more squarely into the centre of society. The walls between the universities and the wider society, it was argued, had to be broken down.”²⁶ This relationship was manifested in several ways through the idea of “technocracy” or governance by a (social) scientific elite: scientific and technological research played an increasingly vital role in economic competitiveness, and progress in social scientific method modelled on natural scientific principles, provided an “objective” evidence base for social and economic policy decisions. And so the late-modern university was expected to add to “the nation’s stock of knowledge,” and it became legitimate for the state to propose research directions.²⁷ (Yet a counter-narrative argues that the late-modern university had its roots in nineteenth-century Germany and Wilhelm von Humboldt’s championing of the research function of the university, underpinned by original and free inquiry,²⁸ with the subsequent subdivision of research into specialist fields and the split between “applied” and “blue skies” research). However, in the 1960s “meritocracy” was also bound up with “technocracy,” according to which the most able students would be trained at university in the (social) scientific skills required to fill the white-collar jobs necessary to enhance national economic

competitiveness.²⁹ Hence the late-modern university was the setting for unprecedented expansion of student numbers into higher education on the basis of personal “merit” rather than social class.

As shown in Table 1 the narrative puts the transition from the late-modern university to the “postmodern university” in the early 1990s. And the crucial factor now is that “higher education is not simply adapting, but is rather transmuting, into a radically new phenomenon,”³⁰ defined by heterogeneity and the lack of any central organizing principle, which “subvert[s] many of the traditional justifications of the university”³¹:

There is a multiplicity of *differences*: different academics pursuing different knowledges, different teams of researchers combining and recombining to investigate shifting topics, different sorts of students following different courses, with different models of study and different concerns among themselves, different employment arrangements for different types of staff—difference everywhere in this postmodern, flexible accommodating university.³²

This is accompanied by the rejection of authoritative knowledge claims. For example, due to the “loss of faith in what is called the ‘Enlightenment project’,” “knowledge as we have known it in the academy, is coming to an end.”³³ Another key feature is pessimism about state-imposed economic instrumentalism; this includes, for example, the advent of student loans and the recasting of students as “consumers” of increasingly vocational degrees, the requirement for research to meet economic or societal needs, and the rise of managerialism and audit techniques as forms of state surveillance and academic self-governance.

Narrating the university’s evolution dovetails neatly with the idea of a historical logic at work. It moves from dogma, to Enlightenment and metanarratives, to the “end of

knowledge”; from a cloistered, elitist model of the university, through a “meritocratic” melting pot and locus of national (social) scientific planning, to something so open and diffuse that we should “cease our search for an underpinning rationale.”³⁴ In the “postmodern university” the logic of history has broken down and its rules no longer apply.

This shared narrative recognizes three central functions of the university—“teaching,” “research,” and “cultural impact”—which take on different emphases and characteristics from the pre-modern university to the “postmodern university” (Table 2).³⁵

Table 2. Narrating the University by Era and Function

	Teaching	Research	Cultural Impact
Pre-modern	Received learning; doctrinal truth; Scholasticism; <i>trivium</i> and <i>quadrivium</i>		
Modern	Liberal education; personal enlightenment; preparation for leadership		Preservation of elite “high culture”
Late-modern	“Objective” (social) scientific training; training scientific and managerial elites; expansion	Scientific base to knowledge; underpins national economic competitiveness; subject specialization	<i>The site of cultural preservation; polarization of “Two Cultures”</i>
Postmodern	Students as consumers; “massification”	Hyper-specialization; academic community a fiction	University education no longer “elite”; no cultural function; lack of consensus; multiple cultures; the “end of meaning”

Teaching

In the pre-modern university, knowledge is founded on religious doctrine and not on individual reasoning, with a curriculum based on received doctrinal truth and Scholasticism. There are seven liberal arts “suitable for educating a free man”: the *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric, and logic; and the *quadrivium* of music, mathematics, geometry, and astronomy. Theology, medicine, and law are taught to administrative and “professional” elites. Teaching is also the primary function of the modern university, marked by the Enlightenment and development of individual reasoning. For John Skorupski this transition is distinguished by the fact that a liberal education “cannot be a matter of indoctrination in a particular set of values”: “The essence of the matter is to understand how liberal education, be it primarily scientific or primarily humanistic, can issue in a convergent outlook on what is great, good, and bad in human life, an outlook not irrationally imprinted but critically achieved.”³⁶ And while administrative or aristocratic elites are trained for leadership, emphasis is placed on the importance of liberal and not professional education.

The late-modern university is characterized by increased state planning and regulation, and the desire for students to be trained in the “objective” (social) sciences as the foundation for social and economic planning. Unprecedented expansion in student numbers leads to “the creation of a sort of decentralized managerial elite while training a mass of scientists to underpin the industrial requirements of a nation operating in a global competitive economy.”³⁷ In the “postmodern university” students are “customers” or “consumers” who purchase training (or “entitlement”) for the job market. Rapid expansion has become “massification,” and large-scale instrumental course delivery entails that students do not experience a liberal education or personal enlightenment: “Through their redesignation as customers, students are both empowered, because their immediate demands are more likely to

be satisfied, and diminished, because their longer-term needs may be ignored and their participation as a symbolic, transcendental, even magical, experience will be denied."³⁸

Teaching and learning in the postmodern university is also marked by heterogeneity and “change”: “flexibility, new forms of vocationalism, new forms of pedagogy, new kinds of students, new kinds of learning, a myriad of motives for study.”³⁹

Research

The shared narrative says that the key purpose of the pre-modern university and modern university was teaching, whereas research was the equal or primary function of the late-modern university. Replicating Humboldt’s nineteenth-century reform of the German university system, late-modern university science underpins technological advance and national economic competitiveness. And the social and economic need for “greater and greater expertise” makes for a “splintering of zones of knowledge” and subject specialization.⁴⁰ In the postmodern university this subject specialization has accelerated to the extent that the notion of an academic community “is a kind of fiction,”⁴¹ or as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, “incumbents of university offices know little, and comprehend even less, of what their next-door neighbours do in their teaching or research hours, and . . . would need a dictionary to understand what the occupants of another floor are talking about.”⁴²

Cultural Impact

We have seen that the idea of a “cultural” function first emerges in narrating the modern university, and the desired need to “preserve the high culture against the onslaughts of modernity.”⁴³ F. R. Leavis in his *Education and the University: A Sketch for an ‘English School’* (1948) and *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (1969), extended this notion to the modern university as “essential to the preservation of the culture of the minority

in the face of mass civilization.”⁴⁴ He argued that instruction in English literature should be central to a rounded university education, because “a focus of cultural continuity can only be in English. . . . There is no other access to anything approaching a full continuity of mind, spirit and sensibility.”⁴⁵ In so doing, the late-modern university becomes a battleground for various metanarratives of what should constitute the “culture” to be preserved for, and transmitted to, administrative and professional elites. Filmer criticizes Leavis’s vision for its sociological naivety in being an “essentially medieval, pre-modern Oxbridge model,” which T. S. Eliot happily parodied as *elitist* “high culture.”⁴⁶ And C. P. Snow famously contested the idea that literature or the humanities should be central to a university education, suggesting that the late-modern university should educate administrative and professional elites in science and engineering instead.⁴⁷ There are several narratives of the cultural function of the postmodern university. First, massification entails that universities are not “primarily concerned with educating political and cultural elites. Such is no longer the case in many contemporary societies. When between a third and a half of the age cohort go to university, numbers alone speak against this possibility.”⁴⁸ Second, that the postmodern university has no cultural function as students receive a purely instrumental education. There is also an accompanying sense of the loss of a cultural/critical function, which Kumar summarizes:

It has often been said that the function of universities is not to swim with the tide but to go against it. It is this conviction that underlies the many accounts of the university that stress its maintenance and enrichment of a certain high culture against the encroachments of business, politics, and everyday life. . . . This line of defence is no longer tenable.

Third, “that there is simply no longer a consensus on what constitutes high culture, nor agreement that this would be a desirable aim even if it were possible.”⁴⁹ Fourth, that the postmodern university embraces difference and so preserves and transmits many cultures, thereby encouraging reflexive critique.⁵⁰ Fifth, that we have reached the “end of meaning,” which undermines the search for any metanarrative or privileged hierarchy of knowledge.

Again, the collective narrative of the evolving research, teaching, and cultural functions of the university by era fits in with the idea of an unfolding logic of history. This cumulates in the postmodern university, an institution (and an era) completely fractured from what went before, where university functions are contrarily regarded as dysfunctions, and where different rules (or indeed no rules at all) apply. But, as I will argue below, this postmodern university is a fiction and is not, in fact, postmodern at all.

Deconstructing the Postmodern University

I earlier employed the idea of “family resemblance” to define postmodernism in terms of a “fusion of horizons,” and with regard to the postmodern university Bauman similarly asks:

Is there any “common feature” left to the variegated collection of entities called universities, and to the equally variegated interior of any one of them (apart, that is, from the joint legal definition), that upholds their claim of unity? Or should we settle for the much more modest Wittgensteinian idea of a “family resemblance” only?⁵¹

Again, we may draw several family resemblances from competing narratives of the postmodern university which can furnish us with a generic definition that complements the resemblances in grand theory: difference, change, diversity, disagreement, fracture, fragmentation. Yet competing ideas of the postmodern university may also be disaggregated

into separate narratives—instrumentalist, gothic, and postmodernist, the dominant themes of which are set out in Table 3.⁵² But as we shall see upon closer examination of these competing narratives, the concept of the postmodern university crumbles.

Table 3. Contested Visions of the Postmodern University

	Keywords and Phrases
Instrumentalist	Wealth creation; university an organization and not a community; managerial and accounting techniques replace collegial forms of governance; impact and use-value over truth; financial cutbacks; students as consumers; “sausage factory”; training for business and industry; decline in intimacy between student and teacher; learning anonymous and self-determined; decline in residential learning
Gothic	“An environment of constant crisis”; “to endure rather than enjoy”; “survivalist”; “diminution in the status of academics”; culture of audit and assessment; “massification” as dilution of “high culture”; student performance and not understanding; skill acquisition not personal development
Postmodernist	Uncertainty; “no grand organizing principle”; “refusal of authoritative expertise and knowledge”; “the academic community is a fiction”; “academic disciplines are symbolic”; “knowledge ... is coming to an end”

The *instrumentalist* narrative focuses on what is viewed as the economic rationalisation of the university and on how this focus on wealth creation has detrimentally affected the university’s functions. We can however recognize this as a critique of the defining characteristics of the modern or late-modern university. Added to this are observations about a detrimental shift from collegial university governance to centralized managerialism and audit, and the related idea that the university has become a corporate enterprise and so is no longer the “community” it once was. There is also concern about the

diminished quality of the student experience as a result of the increase in student numbers and a shift to vocational training. However, this narrative remains firmly tied to the modern or late-modern university.

The *gothic* narrative is a Kafkaesque vision of a bleak and dystopian university. Yet this in essence reflects academic uncertainty and discontent about the perceived negative consequences of the instrumentalist narrative: for example, diminished respect for academics, an increase in bureaucracy (centralized audit of teaching and research quality), and the view that a university education no longer involves self-enlightenment. The following extracts are prime examples (and parodies) of this gloomy narrative:

The mentality . . . has become survivalist, dominated by a sense of the duty to endure rather than enjoy. Articles are published to satisfy the judges of the Higher Education [Funding] Council; additional students are taken on to one's stint or module—but all with a heavy heart and a weariness that undermines the educational mission and belies the academic ethic.

A huge leap in student numbers coinciding with unceasing reductions in funding; a visibly declining university infrastructure which is in urgent need of renovation and which is, in many cases, architecturally inappropriate for handling the large numbers of students that today are routine; a significant diminution in the standing and status of academics; an emphasis on the vocational dimensions of university education; a culture of audit and assessment, all in the name of greater accountability to the public paymaster; a decisive shift away from collegial forms of governance towards distinctly managerial methods; a bewildering number of new arrangements introduced to facilitate and encourage working with outside agencies; an astonishing growth of

new subject areas and associated knowledges; an almost universal conversion to modularization of undergraduate programmes.⁵³

It is, however, clear that the gothic narrative extends the instrumentalist narrative to lament the halcyon days that have passed and is also bound to developments in the modern or late-modern university.

The *postmodernist* narrative seems to provide a different order of analysis and is tied to postmodern theory. First, the postmodern world is understood to be “rapidly changing at a faster speed than universities can adjust to and deal with” and so produces “an environment of constant crisis.”⁵⁴ Change in the “postmodern university” is therefore “altogether more fundamental” and “bears little resemblance to what went before.”⁵⁵ Yet constant change or “hypermodernism” is readily accepted as the defining feature of late modernity or high modernity, and so is not fundamental to postmodernity.⁵⁶ In the context of higher education, Smith and Webster maintain that universities “have never been a fixed entity, frozen in form. Quite the contrary: universities have been ever changing, always adapting to new circumstances”;⁵⁷ while for some there are signs of a postmodern condition, others remain “unconvinced that changes have been so profound as to justify any ‘post’ labels.”⁵⁸

Second, the postmodern university is held to be distinctly postmodern because it has no “grand organizing principle,” its “refusal of authoritative expertise and knowledge,” and because academic disciplines are now “symbolic” and “knowledge . . . is coming to an end.”⁵⁹ On the one hand, this could be partially seen as a reflection of the (modern or late-modern) distinction between Mode 1 (disciplinary) and Mode 2 (transdisciplinary and socially responsive) knowledge.⁶⁰ On the other hand, Kumar makes the following interesting and reflexive observation about the relationship between postmodernism and the postmodern university:

The postmodern turn has, if anything, affected the universities even more than wider society. It is after all within the academy that postmodern theory was first formulated, and it is there that it has been most vigorously elaborated and promoted. The criticisms by different racial, ethnic and gender groups of the orthodox curriculum, and their demand for their “own” studies and departments; the assault by non-Christian religious groups on the predominantly Christian culture of most universities in the West, and their call for the recognition of the distinctive ways of their own cultures in the manner and content of what is taught and studied; the principled rejection by many academic theorists of truth and objectivity that have been the axioms of the rationalist culture of the universities—all these have undermined the concept of a privileged and accepted tradition of high learning that could form the basis of a “core curriculum” or an agreed body of thought suitable for all students and teachers.⁶¹

While this is an astute analysis of the impact of postmodern theory and practice upon the academy, we should remember the distinction made earlier between *postmodernism* and *postmodernity*. While a postmodernist narrative will embrace the claim that “knowledge, as we have known it in the academy, is coming to an end,”⁶² other narratives will not regard this as a statement of fact. We may easily view the postmodernist narrative as a critique of the modern or late-modern university using postmodern theory. In other words, the existence or validity of postmodern theory does not imply that we live in postmodern times or that the postmodern university exists.

Third, and perhaps most damning, is the distinct lack of commitment of those who advocate the existence of the postmodern university to the view that we are located in

postmodernity. Bauman, for example, states that “the world in which we live—the world I prefer to call ‘postmodern’, but would not mind being called ‘late modern’ . . . ‘reflexive modern’ . . . or even ‘surmodern’,”⁶³ and Kumar is equally dismissive in his comment “whether or not we choose to call our times postmodern.”⁶⁴ Thus without a strong commitment to postmodernity, the postmodern university is nothing more than another name for the late-modern university. In terms of the various logics of history discussed earlier, if the postmodern university does not exist in postmodern times, then we may move beyond it.

To sum up, the idea of the postmodern university is a chimera, the product of competing instrumentalist, gothic, and postmodernist narratives, which are all at heart critiques of the modern or late-modern university. These narratives of the postmodern university are also marked by conceptual slippage and contradictions when we consider the history of the whole university sector.

There is slippage between epochs when features deemed to be unique to, and hence defining of, the “postmodern university” turn out not to be unique at all. An example of this slippage is that one of the defining features of the postmodern university is the demise of residential learning and the rise of the “virtual” campus. However, the pre-modern university was itself originally “virtual” as it did not have a campus, was not residential, and teaching took place in churches or rented rooms: *Universitas* denoted the masters and students as a guild or corporation, and not any physical location. Another key feature of the “postmodern university” is held to be its hyper-specialization and the fragmentation of the academy. Yet at the end of the nineteenth century Max Weber famously recognized the separation of the “specialist” and “cultivated man,”⁶⁵ and for Burton R. Clark the evolution of the modern university is similarly marked by subject specialization and fragmenting zones of knowledge.⁶⁶

As for contradictions in narrating the postmodern university, in the UK this label is applied to an apparently homogenous university system; and while variety and differentiation is acknowledged and indeed celebrated, the narratives apply mostly to teaching conditions in new universities rather than in elite or even red brick institutions. In this light, the modern, late-modern, and postmodern university coexist, and deliver a different kind of university experience on a spectrum from skill acquisition to absorption in “high culture.” Yet many would dispute the idea that a university education at any level is purely concerned with skill acquisition and training for industry, arguing that it is primarily concerned with

the conduct of critical enquiry and rational debate, nurturing abilities such as the capacity to distinguish opinion from evidence and to evaluate an argument dispassionately, to learn independently and in groups, to develop abilities to present coherent arguments, to improve the sophistication of one’s thinking, to open one’s imagination and reflexive capabilities, to improve analytical capacities, and to think conceptually.⁶⁷

Yet another concern is that the narrative of the postmodern university masks the inequalities between institutions:

the heterogeneous university is to be resisted on grounds that it underestimates—and this ironically—the realities of *hierarchies of difference* within and between universities. It is all very well to claim the common title “university” for in excess of 100 institutions in Britain today, and it is superficially appealing to contend that each is distinguished from all the others (as well as being internally fractured). But while this highlights the complexities of locating universities on matrices of difference, it is

an absurdity—and one that is ultimately injurious, especially to students—to suggest that differences are such as to subvert hierarchy. Postmodernists may resist judgement, but employers, students, academics, and indeed the public as a whole, do not.⁶⁸

Although I claim that the postmodern university does not exist, its very idea is central to the canon of today's research on higher education policy. The three narratives of the postmodern university embrace a fatalism that suggests we are fractured from history and there can be no going beyond the perceived current state of affairs. However, these narratives do not match the reality of the university experience across the whole sector, and gloss over social inequities within the higher education system. As Smith and Webster put it, "If these are to be tackled, then what must be achieved is at once a refusal of the rampant relativism (and phoney egalitarianism that often goes with this) of postmodernism which announces difference as an excuse to avoid judgement."⁶⁹ The idea of the postmodern university offers "no way out" and so leads to a theoretical and policy stagnation. What we therefore clearly have to do is to think beyond the postmodern university.

Beyond the Postmodern University

If the postmodern university really existed, could we envision moving beyond it? The dedicated literature provides three distinct views of the future of the postmodern university, which views I label *variegated*, *stasis*, and *modern* (Table 4).

Table 4. Contested Visions of the Future University

	Keywords and Phrases
Variegated	optimistic; forward looking; positive; diversity; fragmented expertise; reflexive; negotiate uncertainty
Stasis	dystopian; apathetic; fatalistic; passive; narrowly instrumental; social injustice
Modern	nostalgic; recalling a Golden Age; progressive; self-enlightenment; high culture

The *variegated* option, proposed by Bauman, is an optimistic model of the future of the postmodern university, grounded in the positive benefits of diversity and fragmented expertise. As Bauman explains,

It is the good luck of universities that there are so many of them, that there are no two exactly alike, and that inside every university there is a mind-boggling variety of departments, schools, styles of thought, styles of conversation, even styles of stylistic concerns.

Rather than seeing this postmodern fragmentation of ideas as the “end of knowledge,” it is seen as an asset for dealing with postmodern realities:

In the world in which no one can anticipate the kind of expertise that may be needed tomorrow, the dialogues that may need mediation, and the beliefs that may need interpretation . . . here the recognition of many and varied ways to, and many varied

canons of, higher learning is the condition *sine qua non* of the university system capable of rising to the postmodern challenge.⁷⁰

As Barnett puts it, the role of the postmodern university is to both produce uncertainty and help society negotiate uncertainty.⁷¹ This echoes Griffin's point that "the group of ideas loosely-termed postmodernism, offer a host of critiques which . . . both undermine and at the same time give practical support towards the survival and health of knowledge and values in higher education."⁷² However, this idea was also expressed in modern or late-modern terms: for example, in 1982 Lord Rothschild justified the public funding of the UK Social Research Council on the grounds that we need to spread investment for the (unforeseeable) need of future generations.⁷³ A further example is the need of governments to support a wide portfolio of (social) scientific research in order to be "prepared" for managing risk or uncertainty.⁷⁴

Stasis refers to the view that there is no "beyond" to aspire to; by embracing the fatalism of the "end of history" its adherents do not advocate any change. Smith and Webster detect such apathy when considering the future university: "The university seems resigned to a pre-set [government and industry] agenda which is narrowly instrumental, one can say passive . . . but no alternative vision seems to be available"; "The confidence of intellectuals in their own activities has been reduced and there is no one available to speak for the university."⁷⁵ They are critical of this impasse as they believe that "trendy" postmodern theorizing (especially glorifying the idea of "difference") glosses over social inequalities and retreats from advocating reform of the higher education system:

differentiation has led to even greater hierarchies of difference between universities . . .
. . . a realist position which it is essential to endorse if the issue of *social justice* is to be

addressed . . . to ignore such differences is to turn a blind eye especially to the social inequalities inherent in higher education.

The *modern* position, in contrast, does advocate change, and while searching for the ideal qualities or functions of the future university it falls back on early-modern ideals. A key example is Kumar's desire to return to education for self-enlightenment and the necessity of residential, campus-based learning:

I want to emphasize the informal side of university life, not as a residual but a central feature of universities. . . . I want to see universities as bright and energetic students of all ages have experienced them at all times: as places to explore themselves with others, in speaking, writing, performing, playing, imagining, stretching themselves in mind and body. Nowhere else, and at no other time in their lives, irrespective of age, will students encounter each other with so much time and so many resources to do so much, unconstrained by the requirements of job or family.⁷⁶

He also believes that universities should retain their role in preserving "high culture," that they "need once more to insist on their difference from the rest of society."⁷⁷ Barnett succinctly summarizes this point: "The Western university has ended but we still wish it to live on in ways that bear traces of its heritage."⁷⁸

In this light, the dedicated literature suggests, Janus-like, three options for the future university: looking forward optimistically, and reflexively embracing difference to help society navigate uncertainty; standing still, as postmodernity represents the "end of history" and offers "no way out;" and; moving forwards by embracing a nostalgia for the Golden Age of the modern university.

How, then, do we move beyond the postmodern university? A decentred approach recognizes competing narratives, and then openly picks one for acknowledged normative reasons. As Barnett suggests, “In the end, hanging onto a value framework can only be justified by a persuasive argument for those values,” “the wish still to make sense of the new in the traditions of the old, and indication that the analysis has to be more subtle as to allow both for the new and for the old; paradoxically for continuing values amidst the very loss of values?”⁷⁹

To take a normative stance, I end my discussion with a progressive vision of the future university. It is a university that embraces a modern (or late-modern) preference for inclusivity in knowledge production, transmission, and contestation, and hence is built around the public value of its threefold functions of teaching, research, and cultural enrichment. It appears that in order to move beyond the postmodern university we must appeal to the modern university to take us back to the future.

This vision issues from my demonstration that the postmodern university is a fiction that frames and inhibits our thinking about the future university. Conversely, the postmodern university provides a lens through which we may review broader debates about history and postmodernity. To cling to the idea of the postmodern university is to avoid seeking reform within the higher education system, and to maintain that we are in the “postmodern condition” or at the “end of history” is to subscribe to a form of intellectual apathy that embraces conservatism and impedes change. By exploring competing visions of the future university we may find that progressive yet modernist agendas that re-imagine the public value of knowledge production, transmission, and contestation, can move us beyond the palliative and panacea of the postmodern university.

Notes

¹ Support for this generalisation, though it is not rigorous or scientific, is that via Google Scholar the terms “postmodern university” and “post-modern university” return 1,212 hits, while via Google Search, “post-modern university” and “postmodern university” generate 58,100 (accessed 19 May 2011).

² I am not hostile to postmodernism or postmodern theory per se; rather, I wish to challenge the idea that we live in a truly postmodern age, however we may define this. My claim is that postmodern or interpretive sociological theory is essential to move “beyond” postmodernity.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁴ Anne Griffin, “Knowledge under Attack: Consumption, Diversity and the Need for Values,” in *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education*, ed. Ronald Barnett and Anne Griffin (London: Cassell, 1997), 6.

⁵ Griffin, “Knowledge under Attack,” 6.

⁶ Griffin, “Knowledge under Attack,” 6.

⁷ Indeed, it would not be very postmodern to have just one standard definition.

⁸ For an explanation of language games and family resemblances, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §65–71. For an explanation of hermeneutics and the possibility of “fusion of horizons,” see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 306–7, 374–75.

⁹ Griffin, “Knowledge under Attack,” 6.

¹⁰ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992); and for a critique of this thesis, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23. The owl of Minerva represents wisdom and vigilance, and in contrast to the “grey in grey” of philosophy, the ability to see clearly in the twilight.

¹² For Hegel, there is no end point in the logic of history.

¹³ For the alternative case that we may be on the cusp of post-postmodernity, see Malcolm Bradbury, “What Was Post-Modernism? The Arts in and after the Cold War,” *International Affairs* 71 (October 1995): 763–74; although Bradbury also complements the Hegelian view as he feels that he cannot clearly decipher current times: “For the time being, we seem culturally caught at the moment of uncertainty, seeing forms and historical conditions transforming quickly around us, but finding it difficult to give form, style, meaning to the shape of those things that will indeed come, whether or not we predict or shape them” (774).

¹⁴ See G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Duckworth, 1985).

¹⁵ For more on each of these terms, see respectively, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Modern Late Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Gilles Lipovetsky and Sébastien Charles, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2000); Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

University Press, 1994); and Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (Cambridge: Policy Press, 1997).

¹⁶ See also John C. Scott, "The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations," *The Journal of Higher Education* 77.1 (2006): 1–39. As Scott puts it: "What causes these transformations in the university mission across the centuries? The answer is found in the drive of Western and world civilization" (5). University history, over 850 years, reflects those seismic events that periodically rock humanity.

¹⁷ What is presented here is a reasonable composite of narratives of historical development as found in the literature (or what we may call "ideal types" of university by era). What is still debated is when precisely the pre-modern, modern, late modern and "postmodern" university came into being; whether the selected key features truly characterize just one (or any) of the incarnations of the university; and it can be maintained that all these forms of the university overlap and continue to exist today in either narrative or institutional form.

¹⁸ John Skorupski. "Mill, Liberalism and the Idea of a University," unpublished paper presented at Social and Political Theory Seminar, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra, 20 July 2009.

¹⁹ Scott, "The Mission of the University," 2.

²⁰ Scott, "The Mission of the University," 5.

²¹ Skorupski, "Mill, Liberalism and the Idea of a University," 7.

²² Scott, "The Mission of the University," 3.

²³ Krishan Kumar, "The Need for Place," in *The Postmodern University? Contested Visions of Higher Education in Society*, ed. Anthony Smith and Frank Webster (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1997), 33.

²⁴ Scott, "The Mission of the University," 11, 14.

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- ²⁵ Anthony Smith and Frank Webster, “Conclusion: An Affirming Flame,” in Smith and Webster, *The Postmodern University?*, 109.
- ²⁶ Kumar, “The Need for Place,” 33.
- ²⁷ Smith and Webster, “Conclusion: An Affirming Flame,” 110; see also Claire Donovan, “Consuming Social Science,” in *Governance, Consumers and Citizens: Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Politics*, ed. Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 69–94.
- ²⁸ Scott, “The Mission of the University,” 3.
- ²⁹ See Claire Donovan, “The Chequered Career of a Cryptic Concept,” in *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, ed. Geoff Dench (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 61–72.
- ³⁰ Smith and Webster, “Conclusion: An Affirming Flame,” 104.
- ³¹ Anthony Smith and Frank Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 5.
- ³² Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 11.
- ³³ Griffin, “Knowledge under Attack,” 3.
- ³⁴ Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 9.
- ³⁵ See, for example, Paul Filmer, “Disinterestedness and the Modern University,” in Smith and Webster, *The Postmodern University?*, where he defines the function of the modern universities as “institutions of cultural reproduction,” research and training (52–53). It should be noted that while there are some contrary views, the shared narrative tends to discuss the Humboldt reforms and their consequences in the context of the late-modern university and not the modern university.
- ³⁶ Skorupski, “Mill, Liberalism and the Idea of a University,” 2, 11.
- ³⁷ Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 1.
- ³⁸ Peter Scott, “The Postmodern University?” in Smith and Webster, *The Postmodern University?*, 48.

³⁹ Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 14.

⁴⁰ Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 3. See also Burton R. Clark, *The Higher Education System: Academic Organisation in Cross-National Perspective* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 18.

⁴¹ Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 5.

⁴² Zygmunt Bauman, “Universities: Old, New and Different,” in Smith and Webster, *The Postmodern University?*, 17.

⁴³ Kumar, “The Need for Place,” 33.

⁴⁴ Filmer, “Disinterestedness and the Modern University,” 48.

⁴⁵ F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), 59–60.

⁴⁶ Filmer, “Disinterestedness and the Modern University,” 49. T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948).

⁴⁷ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

⁴⁸ Kumar, “The Need for Place,” 30.

⁴⁹ Kumar, “The Need for Place,” 30.

⁵⁰ See Bauman, “Universities: Old, New and Different.”

⁵¹ Bauman, “Universities: Old, New and Different,” 20.

⁵² On the *instrumental* narrative, see Ronald Barnett, “Supercomplexity and the University,” *Social Epistemology* 12.1 (1998): 44; Bauman, “Universities: Old, New and Different,” 20; Filmer, “Disinterestedness and the Modern University,” 51; Scott, “The Postmodern University?” 36; Smith and Webster, “Changing Ideas of the University,” 2; “Conclusion: An Affirming Flame,” 100. The term *gothic* was first used by Peter Larmour to denote overly pessimistic accounts of change; see also Bauman, “Universities: Old, New and Different,”

17; Smith and Webster, "Changing Ideas of the University," 5; "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 100, 104. On the *postmodernist* narrative, see Barnett, "Supercomplexity and the University," 49; Bauman, "Universities: Old, New and Different," 24; Griffin, "Knowledge under Attack," 3; Smith and Webster, "Changing Ideas of the University," 3, 9; "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 104.

⁵³ Smith and Webster, "Changing Ideas of the University," 5; and "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 100.

⁵⁴ Bauman, "Universities: Old, New and Different," 24.

⁵⁵ Smith and Webster, "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 104.

⁵⁶ See Michael Moran, *The British Regulatory State: High Modernism and Hyper-Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁷ Smith and Webster, "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 99.

⁵⁸ Anthony Smith and Frank Webster, "Preface," in Smith and Webster, *The Postmodern University?*, xi.

⁵⁹ Smith and Webster, "Changing Ideas of the University," 3; Smith and Webster, "Preface," xi; Griffin, "Knowledge under Attack," 3.

⁶⁰ Smith and Webster, "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 104.

⁶¹ Kumar, "The Need for Place," 30–31.

⁶² Griffin, "Knowledge under Attack," 3.

⁶³ Bauman, "Universities: Old, New and Different," 20–21.

⁶⁴ Kumar, "The Need for Place," 33.

⁶⁵ Max Weber, "The 'Rationalization' of Education and Training" in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills ed. and trans, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

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- ⁶⁶ Burton, R. Clark, B. *The Higher Education System: Academic Organisation in Cross-National Perspective* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).
- ⁶⁷ Smith and Webster, "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 108.
- ⁶⁸ Smith and Webster, "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 105–6.
- ⁶⁹ Smith and Webster, "Conclusion: An Affirming Flame," 105–6.
- ⁷⁰ Bauman, "Universities: Old, New and Different," 25.
- ⁷¹ Barnett, "Supercomplexity and the University," 49.
- ⁷² Griffin, "Knowledge under Attack," 3.
- ⁷³ Victor Rothschild, "An Enquiry into the Social Science Research Council," Cmnd. 8554, (London: HMSO, 1982).
- ⁷⁴ Mark Matthews, "Giving Preparedness a Central Role in Science and Innovation Policy," Federation of Australian Scientific and technological Societies (FASTS) Policy Discussion Paper, Canberra, 2009; <http://www.fast.org/images/news2009/preparedness_nov_09.pdf> (accessed 19 May 2011)
- ⁷⁵ Smith and Webster, "Preface," xx.
- ⁷⁶ Kumar, "The Need for Place," 31-32.
- ⁷⁷ Kumar, "The Need for Place," 34.
- ⁷⁸ Barnett, "Supercomplexity and the University," 47.
- ⁷⁹ Barnett, "Supercomplexity and the University," 45, 44.