The digital university, critique and utopian fantasies

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Political critique of the kind alluded to by Latour (2004) tends to concern itself with challenging powerful and dominating structures in society, including state surveillance and limits on personal freedoms. Arguably, the objects of such critique are regarded as large-scale and monolithic in their nature. In contrast, academic critique in education positions itself as a counterpoint to oversimplistic thinking, with common objects of critique being generalisations, unsubstantiated yet dominant discourses, and questionable binaries. Here the underlying analysis is one of complexity, as opposed to clear categorisation. Latour discusses what he sees as is a disturbing tendency for radical doubt and critique to be over-applied in the political sphere, such as in right-wing conspiracy theory, or in the undermining of arguments surrounding environmentalism. He argues:

> …it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below.
>
> (Latour 2004: 229)

This paper will contrast the features of critique in these two contexts, with reference to the concept of *utopias*, arguing that certain strands of contemporary political critique - while appearing to oppose large-scale operations of power - in fact rely on a fantasy of an all-powerful, panoptic state apparatus. Although this vision might be conventionally regarded as a form of dystopia, I propose that these positions are based on a fundamentally utopian belief in the potential for a society based on absolute power / knowledge and efficiency. In this respect this form of critique might be seen as reinforcing a belief in the simple, the unnuanced, the convergent, the unchanging and the absolute. In contrast, educational theory arguably positions itself in opposition to simplistic ideological narratives of potential utopian futures (Peters & Freeman-Moir 2006), seeking to undermine these with theoretical counterpositions and empirical data (in particular qualitative and ethnographic work) which reveal diversity and complexity. The tendency here is to resist attempts at definition, typology and fixity. Here, notions of utopian potentials appear to be rejected in favour of the 'messy' and contingent unfolding of day-to-day social practice.

This utopian / dystopian binary is of particular relevance to the discourses surrounding digital education, which are characterised by a tendency to collapse the digital into either 'Brave New World' utopian 'fantasy' rhetoric - invoking the

production of the graduate as neoliberal subject ready for the challenges of 'the knowledge economy' – or alternatively a dystopian moral panic of collapsing standards, burgeoning plagiarism, lack of attention and 'dumbing down'. In both of these discourses, the university is reduced to a liminal site, an abstraction, reminiscent of Auge's (1995) 'nonplaces' of supermodernity, stripped of situatedness and materiality. The concept of the nonplace will be explored in terms of the etymology of the word 'utopia', which also points to its essential 'placelessness' , as Peters and Freeman Moir point out:

> The concept and geneology of 'utopia' is a rich tapestry…The term itself, coined by Sir Thomas More in the early 16th century, derives from two Greek words: *Eutopia* (meaning 'good place') and *Outopia* (meaning 'no place').
>
> (Peters & Freeman-Moir 2006: 1)

This utopian / dystopian binary manifests itself strongly in discussion of the open educational resources (OER) movement, which has been vaunted as inherently democratising, anti-hierarchical and countercultural, with the university then positioned as representative of elitism, reproduction of privilege, exclusionary, hierarchical and therefore antithetical to these values. However, as Knox points out, 'In defining the object of education to be the enhancement of human life, the OER movement tends to naturalise an archetypal human condition: a set of idealised qualities to which learners are expected to adhere.' (2013: 822). Arguably this vision is reliant on a utopian fantasy of the innately self-directing, autonomous, freefloating subject, in opposition to the absolute and restrictive power of the institution.

This argument will be illustrated with reference to data from a 2-year UK government-funded project on student engagement with technologies (Gourlay & Oliver 2013) involving longitudinal multimodal journaling, whose results undermined existing frameworks and assumptions about student uses of technologies. Instead, the data underscore the specific, situated, sociomaterial nature of the entanglements which constitute their engagement with the digital in education, revealing social actors which are never freefloating, fully autonomous subjects, but are instead always entangled in networks of situated, unfolding practice in complex interplay with nonhuman actors, space and temporality (Gourlay 2014). Drawing on sociomaterial perspectives (e.g. Fenwick et al 2011) and posthuman theory (e.g. Hayles 2012), I will return to Latour and conclude that the role and value of critique may be analysed in terms of the extent to which it supports or challenges utopian thinking and fantasies of monolithic social categories, fixity and power.

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