

The University as Institution and Idea

Ian Angus
Simon Fraser University

THE TITLE OF THE BOOK, *Love the Questions*, is taken from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Speaking to the young Franz Xaver Kap-pus, who, as it turns out, did not eventually become a poet, Rilke advises him as follows:

You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (34–35)

I didn't choose the title, though. We had only a few days before the production deadline, and the great people at Arbeiter Ring Press all pitched in to go through the book and to try to pick out a title. Someone came up with this one, which is a title that reflects what the book is really about. It is a

IAN ANGUS is Professor
of Humanities at Simon

Fraser University.

His new book *The
Undiscovered Country:*

Essays in Canadian

Intellectual Culture will
be released by Athabasca

UP in spring 2013.

great experience to publish a book with a group of people who understand it, and stand behind it, making writing and publishing into a shared project.

This quotation from Rilke articulates an intense relationship between self-expression and self-knowledge: self-knowledge through self-expression and self-expression through self-knowledge, so that answers pale beside the way of life that is opened up by searching. This is what I call “enlightenment” in the book and which I argue is connected to the essence of university education. At its most basic, enlightenment depends on the notion that one’s own view of the world *matters*, that there is something new and precious about addressing one’s experience of the world firsthand, that education—and, indeed, life itself—is not just about fitting into the world but understanding it, acting in it, and changing it.

I first went to university in 1967, so it perhaps understandable that I assumed that the university was naturally at the forefront of social criticism and innovation. Gradually, through over thirty years of teaching, I have been disabused of this assumption. Teaching at university has been professionalized, that is, it is seen as just another good middle-class job like a doctor, lawyer, or bank manager, and students see themselves as just suffering through a necessarily extended schooling due to the advanced credentials that a scientific and technical society requires. My practice in the university, however, in everything from teaching to committee work was based on the assumption that the ideals of the university—free inquiry and social reflection—were still valid. I thought of the obvious failures of this ideal in practical situations as just that: failures to realize an ideal that was still valid and, for the most part, operative.

Two events led to my asking some basic questions about the structure and function of the contemporary university. First, the violation of the academic freedom of David Noble by the Simon Fraser University administration,¹ and, second, the story about teaching a second-year humanities course that I tell in the book, where the inability of students to understand Rilke’s ethic made me wonder if they expected anything like enlightenment from their studies. Rilke advised the young poet that “we must try to assume our existence as *broadly* as we in any way can; everything, even the un-heard of, must be possible in it” (67). This ethic has expanded beyond poetry and philosophy and into the daily activities of work, marriage, and friendship. It is at the centre of the idea that we should actively live our world and not just be victims of it. I began to wonder if the idea

1 Documents pertaining to this event can be found at www.ianangus.ca. The Canadian Association of University Teachers inquiry can be found on their website at www.caut.ca/pages.asp?page=140.

of enlightenment as self-responsibility any longer had a place in the university. And, if so, what sort of institution was I going to pass on to the young who would inherit it?

I wanted to ask basic questions about the university and also to write something that would provoke debate and that would ideally bring the issue in front of the Canadian public. One may notice that others who, like myself, have taught in the university but not generally made it the subject of their research have also begun to do this recently. It may be a sign of the times. I took as the leading question in my investigation the issue of corporatization of the university, which has been talked about for some time and which has even become something of a slogan. My observations suggested that it pointed to the central issues. But first I had to investigate if my expectations for the university were just a product of my time and place or if they were rooted in the structure and mission of the university as such. This approach led me into a historical investigation of the idea of the university, which is an established genre of thinking and writing about the university that has accompanied it from its beginnings. Most important are the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt on the research-teaching focus begun in the German university and Cardinal Newman on the liberal arts focus of the English-speaking tradition. Each of these in its own way aimed at a *unity* of knowledge in the educated person that could ground a synthesis of inquiry, scholarship, teaching, and action that ties the university to enlightenment.

However, the idea of the university cannot be defined in abstraction from the institution itself. If one begins from defining the idea then one tends to describe all changes as falling away from the idea, leading to a conservative narrative of history as a more or less continuous decline. But, there is no utopia at the beginning and changes are often necessary adaptations to new situations. Alternatively, the assumption of change as necessarily an advance, of improvement as built in to change, is also superficial and gives us the more predominant, liberal, Whig narrative of history as progress. I needed a basis in the past for evaluation, but also an analysis of contemporary changes, in order to propose an *evaluation* of the contemporary university. Such an attempt would be a continuation of the humanistic, ethical view of the university as a place for enlightenment but also a realistic, unsentimental account of its present condition.² In the

2 The evaluative component of the analysis, and its basis in the history of the university, is one of the main lines of questioning in the interview “Ian Angus in conversation with Bob Hanke” in *Canadian Journal of Media Studies*, Special Issue on Media, Knowledge, and the Network University.

best case scenario, it might aid us in defining what we expect from the university and what we are willing to do to fulfil that expectation.

I wanted to write an accessible book, with a minimum of intimidating academic apparatus, so the conceptual apparatus was scrutinized and unnecessary theoretical references were pruned and stuck into a bibliographic narrative at the back. Nevertheless, there were two basic concepts that the narrative could not do without: the concept of “enlightenment” to unearth and present the criteria for ethical-political evaluation and the concept of “techno-science” to comprehend the contemporary reality of the institution insofar as it is based on the interpenetration of scientific research and practical innovation that is the main justification of the university within technological civilization. I put two notes on these concepts at the back of the book, hoping that they would not interrupt that narrative and yet be available as starting points for those who wanted to pursue the issues more deeply. In this way I hoped to be able to deal adequately with both the “idea” and the “institution” of the university and to rescue evaluation from assumptions implying the necessity of either decline or advance.

The historical investigation of the idea of the university came to the conclusion that there is no single essence or idea of the contemporary university. Since the beginning of the modern university with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, three parts have coexisted within the university. The modern university involves the survival of the humanistic tradition of the liberal arts, the interaction of research and teaching that comes from the scientific tradition, and has been affected by the incorporation of professional schools. For some time, the professional schools were limited to law, medicine, theology, but the business school has now replaced theology in giving instruction in the unquestionable assumptions of contemporary civilization. I argue that the leading role has become practical application, which is driven now as before by the professional schools but has incorporated scientific research due to the rise of techno-science. These two forces have combined to define the contemporary focus of the university on producing practical innovations. The last area of the university to become altered to fit this new environment is liberal education or the humanities. This process began in the 1980s and explains the recent rise in contemporary concern about the fate of the university.

Closer investigation required that the issue of whether or not a corporate model has come to predominate and restructure the university can be divided into three separate issues: teaching, which means the relation between students and professors; direct corporate influence on research priorities and applications of research results; and changes in the univer-

sity due to technological changes in communication which, although they have come with corporatization, cannot be reduced to it. The analysis of what corporatization might mean, and the possibilities for the contemporary university, are somewhat different in each case. I come to the following conclusions: 1) Proper teaching requires resisting the idea that teaching is a process of transmission of knowledge or imparting information that is already present; it must emphasize that knowledge is produced and invite students into the process of production. 2) Even in a technological capitalist society there is a role for public review of innovations, independent, non-corporate research programs, and academic freedom; research can be tied to social development priorities and the public can be strengthened—including but going beyond state structures—so that knowledge does not become totally privatized. 3) The technological changes leading toward a network society are changing the role of the university in public reflection and threatening to subsume university-based thought and research into the process of practical application in techno-science. Nevertheless, the problems of identity in the social realm to which scientific-technological civilization leads (due to continuous and often destabilizing innovation) suggest a new location for enlightenment upon which the university can rebuild its humanistic legacy. Identity anxieties bring the issues of the new social movements into dialogue with knowledge and research traditions at home in the university.

Whether or not these possibilities can be made realistic options, however, depends on if the public interest can be sufficiently revived and if sufficiently powerful social agencies come to regard such an agenda as pertinent to their own enlightenment. In this sense, a genuine revival of the role of the university in individual and social enlightenment depends on a revitalization of social solidarity.

Works Cited

Angus, Ian. *Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Press, 2009.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Trans. M.D. Herter. New York: Norton, 1993.

Identity
anxieties bring
the issues of
the new social
movements into
dialogue with
knowledge and
research
traditions at
home in the
university.

