



Public Engagement as a Space of Encounter and Dissensus

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ABSTRACT

Cooperation between academia and the wider public can take different forms and serve different purposes. But the question of why universities need public engagement concerns the very idea of the universal, which is ingrained in the title of this social institution: interrogating the role of univers(al)ity and its impact on socio-political processes, we call into question the (dis)embeddedness of the university in/from society. Based on the discussions during the “Slavic Studies Goes Public” workshop at the University of St Andrews, this text presents reflections around the purpose of public engagement, which is described as the necessity to liquify the boundary between the university and the public.

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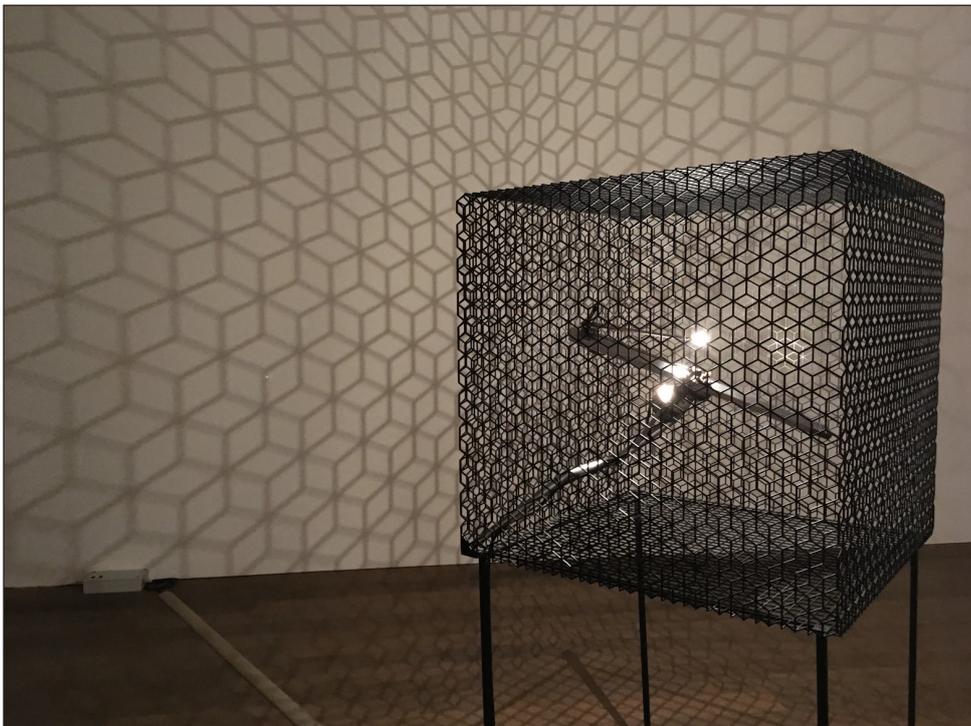
Cooperation between academia and the wider public can take different forms and serve different purposes. But the question of why universities need public engagement itself suggests a certain tautology in the underlying logic. What seems to be at stake in this question is the very idea of the universal, which is ingrained in the title of this social institution. In other words, by interrogating the role of univers(al)ity and its impact on socio-political processes, we call into question the (dis)embeddedness of the university in/from society. On this basis, it is perhaps through a discussion of the university that we should approach public engagement in the first place.

If we accept the central role of knowledge in social transformation and democratic emancipation, the idea of education acquires a strong political meaning. Be it a tool of oppression or resistance, education can be defined as a process of learning that forges (political) identities and subjectivities, by means of (re)distributing the sensible and setting the horizon of the possible. The space of learning thus turns into an incubator for the socio-political imagination where societal foundations can be (re)negotiated and (de)stabilized.

Lurking behind the university–public nexus is the problem of (in)equality of access to processes and spaces of learning for different members of society. The impossibility of coextension between the university and society as a whole, which the idea of public engagement seems to address (or legitimize?), stems from a symbolical boundary that designates the former as a locus of knowledge production and distribution, while putting the latter in the paradoxical position of an object of study and a knowledge consumer at the same time. Endowed with money and time, the university is thus one of the few privileged spaces for learning, and one that remains available (and, no less importantly, affordable) to only some parts of the public.

Reflecting on our discussions at the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop at the University of St Andrews, I would suggest that the primary goal of public engagement should be the liquifying of this very boundary between the university and the public in order for the university to stand up to its name and not fall prey to a tendency to close itself off. Transforming this boundary into a place of encounter—a hybrid third space—appears to be promising for a number of reasons. I will try to sketch these briefly below.

An encounter on this boundary can be a liminal experience, not only in the sense of one's closeness to “the Other”, but also as a way of acquiring some distance from and perspective on oneself. Such encounters have the potential to (temporarily) destabilize identities—in a particular discipline, profession, nation, or species—in order to allow new constellations and entanglements of relations to develop. These encounters can become more than one-off events, turning into a continuous process of reaching out from within and across the boundary. Instead of being a mere component of a certain project, public engagement can become part of a larger process of democratic cosmopolitanization without an end (both in terms of open-endedness and unfinishedness), a task worthy of an entity that lays claim to the title of “university”.



Conrad Shawcross. *Slow Arc Inside a Cube IV*, 2009. Collection Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d’Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean. Photo by the author taken during his stop-over in Luxembourg on a return journey from the workshop in St Andrews.

Public engagement is about community-making by means of sharing knowledge, which can feed into imaginaries of being-in-common. The task of establishing commonalities, however, should not translate into homogenizing tendencies, where differences are shut down through the tyranny of hegemonic consensus. Dissensus is an integral part of education, and liminal encounters surely can be conflictual. It is this conflict that sustains the process of becoming an emancipated community. Public engagement might thus be construed as part of a process of public poiesis that builds linkages across social and national divides through practices of collective learning. In this way, a crucial task of public engagement should be to establish solidarity with those who are marginalized and discriminated against, inviting them to share equally in the task of building common lifeworlds and dreamworlds conjured up by the power of naming, explaining, projecting, and prototyping.

The notion of power, of course, cannot be avoided. The idea of knowledge as a driver of emancipation and learning as a crucible of commonalities is not enough to justify public engagement unless structural inequalities are taken into account. As education becomes increasingly commodified and knowledge remains entangled in the hierarchies of power, the traditional opposite of knowledge and learning—ignorance—must be understood not as a failure of individual responsibility but as a product of social exclusion. What is more, the boundary regulating access to knowledge acquisition frequently gets transposed to the very centre of the university, structuring the relations between the (omniscient) teacher and the (always catching up) student in a hierarchical manner—a model that one can often see reproduced in public engagement. Real engagement needs to address these hierarchies both within and across the boundary of the university and the public. It requires us to recognize knowledge behind the shield of ignorance, transforming this boundary into a space of epistemic humility, where a combination of learning and unlearning can translate into collective thinking. In this never-ending encounter with the public and, therefore, its own fractured universality, the university can take up the role of a vanishing mediator between the community that exists and the one that is always yet to come.

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