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Constructing Universities for Democracy

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Abstract
Universities can sharpen their commitment to democracy through institutional change. This might be resisted by a traditional understanding of universities. The question arises whether universities have defining purposes that demarcate possible university policy, strategic planning, and priority setting. These are significant questions because while universities are among our most stable long-term institutions, there is little consensus on what they are, what they are for, and what makes them valuable. This paper argues that universities can in fact be organized around a wide variety of purposes without thereby becoming any less real as universities. Normative discourse around universities should therefore be unafraid to consider novel ideas that test the limits of our current university concept and our entrenched practices. The argument applies fresh insights from feminist philosophy. Haslanger's (Haslanger, S. 2000. Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? Noûs 34(1), 31-55, Haslanger, S. 2005. What are we talking about? The semantics and politics of social kinds. *Hypatia* 20(4): 10-26, Haslanger, S. 2012. *Resisting reality: Social construction and social critique*. Oxford University Press.) ameliorative account of gender and race provides a model for how to frame novel and critical ideas about universities. Ásta's (Ásta. 2018. *Categories we live by: The construction of sex, gender, race, and other social categories.* New York: Oxford University Press.) conferralist framework explains how universities are socially constructed and where our university concept, social behavior, and normative discourse fits into that construction. Stakeholders have the power to create the social fact of whether an institution is a university and what being a university means in each context. However, stakeholders are a heterogenous group and contemporary universities are fragmented institutions in desperate need for an ameliorative account that would guide their construction toward democratic value. That account can build on a distinction between valuing universities as expressions of democracy, its symbols, components, and causal agents.

Keywords University · democracy · Ásta · Haslanger · ameliorative analysis · social construction · the idea of a university · higher education · value theory

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Introduction

In the first week of January 2021, an armed mob stormed the United States Capitol in a violent attempt to prevent the transfer of power to a democratically elected president. Later that year, the president of Johns Hopkins University published a book entitled *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Daniels 2021). Having described the role of American universities in securing fair access and social mobility, educating democratic citizens, creating democratically relevant knowledge, and fostering dialogue across difference, Daniels wrote:

> The university cannot, as an institution, be agnostic about, or indifferent to, its opposition to authoritarianism, its support for human dignity and freedom, its commitment to a tolerant multiracial society, or its insistence on truth and fact as the foundation for collective decision-making … Not only must this indispensable institution seize this opportunity to understand what ails our liberal democracy, but it must also go further in discerning its own role in fostering liberal democracy, its contributions and its failures, and then must act with fierce and unstinting resolve in remedying these places where it has stumbled. It is hardly hyperbole to say that nothing less than the protection of our basic liberties is at stake (Daniels 2021, 249–251).

These strong remarks urge universities to sharpen their commitment to democracy. Universities might respond to such calls in widely different ways; some by ignoring them, others by inspired transformation. Consider the following scenario:

> **Radical Transformation:** Dominant stakeholders of a university, including not only its board and management but also the academic community, staff, students, parents, and alumni, vow to make the university as valuable as possible for democracy by transforming its entire structure, redefining its aims and priorities. Research and education programs are adjusted, established, and discontinued to make sure democracy is served in all facets of university operations. Academic freedom is curtailed to make sure research and education have a strong, positive connection with the overarching goal of serving democracy. More drastically still, programs and activities with democratic value are established and given a prominent place in the institutional structure, even though they have nothing to do with education, research, or the application of knowledge. In short, efforts to serve democracy are moving this institution away from being the sort of thing we normally have in mind when we use the word 'university'.

It is only natural to wonder how far universities might move in this direction while staying in the category of universities. A predictable response to the scenario above might go as follows:

> **Traditional Understanding:** Universities are, by definition, institutions organized around higher learning and the preservation and discovery of knowledge; academic freedom is essential to such organizations. This is what it means to be a university. The purpose of fostering democracy is therefore at most incidental to universities. If universities have democratic value, this is a mere side-effect, not a necessary feature reflecting their core purpose. Therefore, if a university were to reorganize around

> a fundamental commitment to democracy, as in Radical Transformation, it would betray its central purpose and transmute into something other than a university.

The tension between Radical Transformation and Traditional Understanding raises questions about what it is to be a university. What would it mean for universities to have a central purpose, and how is this relevant to questions of university policy, strategic planning, and priority setting? These are significant questions because while universities are among our most stable long-term institutions, there is little consensus on what they are, what they are for, and what makes them valuable. Half a century ago, Kerr (2001/1963) described the contemporary university as a "multiversity", an inconsistent and amorphous entity embracing many truths or "souls", each making a claim to being its animating principle. More recently, Zgaga's (2012, 419) proclaimed that "the idea of a university – the single idea of a university – is dead. Not to worry; there is now a pleasant view as a thousand flowers blossom on its grave". At the same time, universities are continuously ranked and measured against criteria that inevitably make assumptions about what universities ought to be doing and what it means for them to be doing their job well (Brink 2018; Hazelkorn 2014). These criteria exert powerful influence on universities competing for funds and prestige based on implicit ideas of a university. The "thousand flowers" may blossom in the academic literature while the realities on the ground conform to a narrow range of possibilities.

In this paper, I will argue that universities can in fact be organized around a wide variety of purposes without thereby becoming any less real as universities. There are various constraints, to be sure. If the Radical Transformation scenario were to be carried out, it would result in a novel institution that our current concept of a university is poorly equipped to handle. Conceptual indeterminacy alone is not a strong argument against such plans, however. Our concepts should serve our goals, and our goals should reflect an earnest, normative discourse about values. If Radical Transformation goes too far in its plans to abolish academic freedom and direct energies away from research and education, this is not because such plans violate the concept of a university but rather because real values are better served, all things considered, if universities preserve academic freedom and continue to focus on research and education. Normative discourse about the roles and purposes of universities should therefore be unafraid to consider novel ideas, "feasible utopias" (Barnett 2013, 2017) that test the limits of our current concept and our entrenched practices. Daniels is right that in these efforts, the value of democracy needs to be prioritized.

My argument will rely on recent work in feminist philosophy that has not been previously brought to bear on these questions. First, I make use of Sally Haslanger's (2000; 2005; 2012) distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative ways of answering the question "What is X?" and argue that her ameliorative account of gender and race provides a model for how to frame novel and critical ideas about universities. An ameliorative account of universities is ultimately not aimed at analyzing our current university concept or describing the empirical reality of universities; it aims to articulate the concept of a university in a way that best serves fundamentally important values.

Second, I make use of Ásta's (2018) conferralist framework to explain how universities are socially constructed institutions, and to explain where our university concept, social behavior, and normative discourse fits into that construction. Inspired by Ásta's account of the construction of sex, gender, race, and other social categories, I consider the property of being a university to be conferred not only by formal authorities but also informal stake-

holders. Being a university is a status that enables an institution to operate in certain ways and gives it formal rights while also imposing constraints and obligations. The content of this status – what the institution is enabled to do, what rights it has, how it is constrained and how it is obligated – depends on how the conferring agents act and speak. This in turn reflects how they conceptualize universities. Their conceptualization is also reflected in how the conferring agents treat certain features of institutions as markers for the status of university. The property of being a university is therefore not tied to any specific university concept; the conferring agents are a heterogenous group, their ideas and expectations change over time and vary across different societal contexts. The upshot is that it is ultimately up to the conferring agents, collectively, to construct universities for whatever purposes they consider most valuable.

Having used Ásta's conferralist framework to locate the role of stakeholder conceptualizations in the social construction of universities, I go on to consider the variety of competing university ideas, contrasting them with the homogenizing effects of global trends. My central claim here is that the contemporary discourse on universities presents a fragmented institution in desperate need for an ameliorative account that would guide the social construction of universities in a purposeful way instead of being pushed around by hegemonic trends.

Against this background, I draw on Ziliotti's (2020) taxonomy of value to present a schematic analysis of the democratic value of universities: Universities can be valued as expressions of democracy, as symbols of democracy, as components of democracy, and as causal agents bringing about various effects that are useful or even necessary for democracy. My goal here is to present the beginnings of an ameliorative account that could encourage authorities and stakeholders to construct more democratically valuable universities.

What is distinctive about this contribution to the philosophy of higher education is that philosophical tools developed in different contexts by Ásta, Haslanger, and Ziliotti, are applied for the first time to the question of how to understand universities and their democratic role. This provides fresh insights into the complex relationship between the university concept, stakeholder behavior, social construction, and normative discourse around universities.

The text is organized as follows. First, I consider universities through the lens of Haslanger's distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative approaches, and argue that canonical works on the idea of a university are ameliorative. Second, I use Haslanger's account of gender to mirror the ameliorative character of contemporary critiques of universities. Third, I present Ásta's conferralist framework and explain how it applies to universities. Fourth, I consider the multiple conceptions and uniform realities of universities. Fifth, I argue that democracy deserves urgent attention and formulate the democratic value of universities. The concluding section applies the results to the opening question of what it is to be a university.

Three Approaches to the Question "What is a University?"

Although Haslanger (2000; 2005; 2012) draws her distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative ways of answering "What is X?" questions in the context of theorizing about gender and race, it applies equally well to the question of what it is to be a university.

A Conceptual Approach

The conceptual approach has long been associated with the analytical tradition in philosophy. It uses a priori methods to reveal *our* concept of X – what we take ourselves to be doing when we use the concept. Sometimes, conceptual analysis aims to reveal logically necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept to apply.

Our concept of a university is revealed by how we are prepared to apply the term 'university'. We would reject as false any proposition stating that X is a university upon learning that X is not organized around either education or research.[1] Moreover, our current concept of a university seems to entail that an institution devoted to research would not count as a university unless it also engaged in education. Nevertheless, the concept of a university is without doubt "open textured" (Waismann 1945) in that it may be unclear whether it applies to some objects "not because of a vagueness in the concept but because the objects are new and unexpected in some way, and the concept simply is not capable of handling this odd case" (Vecht 2020, 1). This certainly applies to the case of Radical Transformation considered above, where questions arise about whether the institution is or is not a university. In response to such challenges, open textured concepts can adapt over time, possibly even through "concept-engineering" (Cappelen 2018; Flocke 2021). Our current concept of a university might thus evolve in response to indeterminacies of application, new empirical knowledge, or reflection on the purpose of having the concept of a university in the first place. Be that as it may, it seems safe to say that our current concept of a university is captured at an abstract level by defining universities as institutions or communities organized around the purpose of higher education and typically also research.

A Descriptive Approach

The conceptual approach stays within the confines of our current concept. This limitation can be overcome by looking beyond our introspective intuitions and investigating the external phenomena, such as the operation and history of actual universities. Quine (1951) argued more than 70 years ago that philosophical inquiry should move beyond "armchair analysis" and acknowledge the relevance of empirical investigation. This influential development is sometimes referred to as the "naturalistic turn" in epistemology and philosophy of science.

The descriptive approach uses empirical or quasi-empirical methods to enrich our concepts with information about the natural or social kinds referred to by the term in question. Sociological and historical investigation may thus reveal what kind of social institution universities are – or whether universities do indeed form a single kind. The aim here is to adjust our conceptual tools to what may be learned through empirical investigation, to "cut the world at its joints" so to speak.

The descriptive approach coheres with externalism about meaning, according to which the objective meaning of the term 'university' may be different from what we subjectively mean by it. On the externalist view, the term 'university' refers to a reality that may or may not correspond neatly with our current concept, but which is demarcated by an existing social kind. For example, conceptual analysis might suggest that research is a necessary condition for being a university, but we discover empirically that research is a relatively

[1] For an account of the relationship between concepts (and "concept-engineering") and truth-assessments, see Flocke (2021).

late newcomer in their 900-year long history (Jonsson 2006). Similarly, we might one day discover empirically that contrary to the logical conditions built into our current concept of a university, there can in fact be universities that are not organized around education.

Empirical research can reveal what kinds of causal structures universities are, thereby helping us see how they serve important values, including democracy, and identify effective strategies for achieving them. We know that higher-educated citizens are more likely to vote, but relatively little is known about which aspects of higher education account for this association (Inkinen and Saari 2019). Improved understanding of this relationship requires empirical research that would further improve our understanding of how universities can serve and support democracy.

Empirical research also reveals that universities in authoritarian regimes tend to be stunted in their ability to engender social critique and democratic virtues. In the 18th century, the Swedish government supported training in Latin because this "would prevent the dissemination of dangerous doctrines in theology or politics to the general public" (Jonsson 2006, 54–55). For similar reasons, universities in the Soviet Union were confined to teaching only (ibid.). Examples of this sort are readily apparent at universities in 21st century authoritarian regimes (Moussa and Abouchedid 2016), suggesting that there is an empirically discoverable relationship between a country's political system and its universities. Generally, universities have characteristics, prerequisites, and social consequences that can only be discovered empirically. This includes an examination of the profound effects the spread of Western university models has had on societies throughout the world (Schwartzman 1992).

An Ameliorative Approach

While the conceptual approach stays within our current concept, the descriptive approach stays within the confines of describing an existing reality. An ameliorative approach differs from both in that it starts by looking for the purpose of having the concept in the first place and then asks how the concept would best serve that purpose. On this approach, pursuing the question 'what is a university?' means revising or re-interpreting our concept of a university so that it may better serve a worthy purpose. An ameliorative approach seems particularly well suited to the task of showing how the concept of a university should be interpreted if it is to serve democratic values. The starting point of inquiry is the value of democracy, and its goal is to articulate the concept of a university in a way that is most conducive to that value.

It may be objected that not everyone will agree that the purpose of the concept of a university is to help create conditions for a flourishing democracy. As McGill (2020) points out, ameliorative accounts can run into problems if there is little agreement on the starting points of inquiry, its goals, and its success conditions. Given the variety of current views about the purpose(s) of universities, we cannot assume that the one and only purpose of the concept of a university is to serve democratic values. This problem disappears, however, if we take university to be a heterogenous concept, and if we take seriously the power of university stakeholders to construct universities that best suit their considered values. An ameliorative account of universities for the sake of democracy can then be presented as one compelling way of understanding universities, even as the possibility of other conceptualizations is left open.

What purpose is ultimately served by having and using the concept of a university? The current use of the concept influences in countless ways how societies are organized, how goods are defined and distributed, how status, power, opportunity, and prestige is (or is not) available to individuals and communities. We may hope that this is all conducive to democracy, but we may also have our doubts. Sandel (2020, 155) argues that "higher education has become a sorting machine that promises mobility on the basis of merit but entrenches privilege and promotes attitudes toward success corrosive of the commonality democracy requires." If we agree, and if we also value democracy, we have good reason to revise our current university concept and associated beliefs and behaviors.

The Normative Dimension and the "Idea of a University"

The threefold distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative approaches concerns the question "what is a university?" But lurking in the background are normative questions about how universities *ought* to be, and what they are *for*. Conceptual analysis reveals that our concept of a university contains a normative commitment to the value of knowledge or learning, and descriptive inquiry can be motivated by a desire to investigate the potential of universities to serve specific values. The ameliorative approach stands out, however, as the only one that is essentially devoted to serving normative purposes.

Canonical works on the 'idea of the university' contain a mixture of conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative elements. They imagine, explain, and argue how universities ought to be, considering the normative stances of various university stakeholders. Ultimately, however, they are not concerned with just describing stakeholders' ideas or the historical development of such ideas; they try instead to present a compelling vision. Well known examples include works by Humboldt (1970/1810), Newman (2015/1852), Jaspers (1961), Whitehead (1967/1927), Oakeshott (1989), and Ortega y Gasset (1946/1930), who asserted that "the root of university reform is a complete formulation of its purpose. Any alteration, or touching up, or adjustment … unless it starts by reviewing the problem of its mission – clearly, decisively, truthfully – will be labour lost" (37). He offered a vision for Spanish universities just before the second republic, emphasizing the need for a cultured professional elite but downplaying the role of research. In different ways, these authors attempt to offer normative frameworks for the university. In doing so, they go well beyond considerations of its mere concept and history; instead, they articulate how universities can best serve what they consider important purposes, given the perceived realities of the time. This makes their accounts fundamentally ameliorative rather than conceptual or descriptive.

Under favorable, historical circumstances, normative accounts can lead to changes and even transformations of universities. For example, Humboldt's account is typically taken to have inspired the founding or transformation of many European and American universities (Kwiek 2003, but see Labaree 2017 for a contrary opinion). They can also be misused for ideological purposes, masking special interests as a common good, or exaggerating the extent to which some normative idea has been actualized (Fink 2019; Habermas 1987; Ricken 2007). But without such ideas, we would only be able to analyze the development of universities "descriptively and affirmatively, instead of normatively and critically", and this may result in "the experience of impotence" in the academy (Sorensen 2015, 35). With firm, normative ideas comes the empowerment of being conscious of one's purpose.

Good conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative accounts can help us avoid narrow preconceptions about universities and open our eyes to new possibilities. Calhoun (2009) suggests that "to speak of "the university" is to speak of an ideal that sometimes moves most of us, but also an illusion that the universities we know best are somehow typical" (584). To avoid such confusion, our descriptive concept should be rich enough to accommodate the many varieties of actual universities, beyond our limited personal experience and imagination. Similarly, we should leave room for a variety of normative conceptions of the university. As Brink (2018) argues, "No university can do it all … we need multiple models of success … an academic ecosystem, a landscape of purposes, not just a ladder of esteem." (251). There are certainly many ways of being a university. But as Stein (2019) argues, pluralizing possible higher education requires breaking the mold of existing conceptual limitations and denaturalizing ontological categories. Instructive models for how to do this can be sought in feminist philosophy.

Haslanger's Ameliorative Account

Haslanger's account of gender is guided by the value of justice, resulting in the following definition of gender as a social class:

> S *is a woman* iff_{df} S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction.
>
> S *is a man* iff_{df} S is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's biological role in reproduction. (Haslanger 2000, 39)

These definitions represent gender categories as tools of oppression. The way to fight that oppression, according to Haslanger, is to see gender for what it is instead of being misled by ideological beliefs that justify the subordination of women, such as the belief that gender is a natural category. Accordingly, the ultimate aim of gender talk ought to be to eliminate gender as we know it:

> I believe gender *as we know it* takes hierarchical forms as men and women; but the theoretical move of treating men and women as only two kinds of gender provides resources for thinking about other (actual) genders, and the political possibility of constructing non-hierarchical genders. (43)

Haslanger's theoretical move mirrors an important strand in contemporary university critique. Universities have been described as colonizing organizations that serve to entrench oppression and injustice (Cantwell 2021; Stein 2019). Such descriptions are ameliorative in that they intend to show universities for what they are instead of being misled by ideological beliefs that justify the status quo. The same can be said of the many, powerful accounts that describe universities as neoliberal institutions serving global capitalism, consumerism,

managerialism, and elitism, and as a result undermining democracy (Brown 2015; 2019; Fleming 2021; Giroux 2007; 2018). Sandel's (2020) critique of universities as major culprits in what he calls the "tyranny of merit" falls into this category as well, and so does Collini's (2012; 2017) critique of the corporate tide in universities. The goal in all cases is to conceptualize universities in ways that highlight their shortcomings with respect to fundamental values. Their point is to make it possible to ameliorate these shortcomings, perhaps even to the point of eliminating universities as we know them.

There is another side to the task of ameliorating the sorry state of universities. Ameliorative accounts can serve democracy not only by describing what needs to be altered but also by highlighting what needs to be nurtured, as exemplified by the account presented toward the end of this article formulating the democratic value of universities. The point of ameliorative accounts is to motivate change, and this can be done through critical and constructive conceptualizations alike. So let us next consider how conceptualizations of universities play a role in their social construction.

Ásta's Conferralist Framework

Ásta (2018) provides a conferralist framework for understanding social properties, including "being Western, white, straight female … a redhead, male, black, married, queen, president, umpire, *a university*, …" (16, emphasis added). To illustrate the idea of conferral, Ásta discusses the baseball property of a pitch being a strike (8–9). If we believe there is no fact of the pitch being a ball or a strike independent of the judgment of the umpire, then we believe the property of being a strike (or ball) is conferred on the pitch by the umpire's judgment. This belief is consistent with recognizing that the umpire's goal in making the call is to track whether or not the trajectory of the ball fits a physical pattern prescribed by the rules of baseball. Attempting to track a physical fact that is rendered significant by the concept of baseball, the umpire confers on the pitch the property of being a strike, thereby creating a baseball fact.

Applying this framework to properties of people, Ásta calls the property the conferrers are attempting to track a "base" property. A base property is a feature of an individual (or entity) rendered socially significant by agents who confer a social status on those taken to have the feature. This status consists in constraints on and enablements to their behavior. The power to confer comes from the standing or authority the conferring agents have in the context. An example of a base property could be the features of a good driver, made socially significant by authorities' efforts to track them through their procedures for granting a driver's license, thereby conferring on individuals the social status of being legal drivers.

The conferral of social properties is what the social construction of categories of individuals and institutions amounts to on Ásta's account. Within this framework, the category of university exists because institutions that are taken to have certain features (base properties) are given a status (conferred social property) by agents with standing or authority in the context (stakeholders, government).

Ásta distinguishes between *institutional* properties, such as being elected president of the United States, and *communal* properties, such as being cool. These are two kinds of social properties. An institutional property is explicitly conferred by a "person or entity or group in authority … by means of a speech act or other public act … under the appropriate circumstances" in an attempt to track some base property. A communal property is explicitly

or implicitly conferred by a person, entity, or group with standing "by means of attitudes and behavior … in a particular context" in an attempt to track some base property, consciously or unconsciously (21–22).

I suggest that being a university is both an institutional and a communal property. It is institutional insofar as the conferring agents have authority to create rights and obligations. This is true of university charters, issued by secular or ecclesiastical authorities (see Kivinen and Poikus 2006). Authorities grant universities license and accreditation, creating formal rights and obligations that may be spelled out in laws and regulations. Having these rights and obligations constitutes having the institutional property of being a university.

In granting university license, authorities are attempting to track some base properties – they would be abusing their power if they granted license without regard to whether recipients met relevant conditions. Authorities make features of institutions socially significant by turning them into base properties and making their presence a condition for the conferral (or renewal) of university status. In doing so, they are guided by a university concept, just like the umpire is guided by the concept of baseball when deciding whether a particular pitch is a ball or a strike. This concept can be made more or less explicit in legally authoritative documents, establishing the authority of conferring agents (such as accrediting bodies) and defining the conditions for being a university.

Being a university is not only an institutional property but also a communal one. We can imagine an institution having the institutional property of being a university as described above, and yet being largely ignored or not considered a "real" university by stakeholders such as parents and young people, professional academics, community leaders, industry, etc. In this imagined case, the university offers credentials that give graduates formal rights and obligations and yet, stakeholders that have standing in contexts of industry and community do not treat them as "real" university degrees. Their holders have the institutional property of being university graduates but lack the corresponding communal property, and the same applies to the institution as a whole. The inverse can also be imagined; a context in which an institution has the communal property of being a university despite lacking formal recognition.

The institutional and communal properties come apart if formal authorities and informal stakeholders are tracking different base properties. Certain features of institutions are made socially significant by the authorities' act of granting university status to institutions taken to have them. These are not necessarily identical to the features made socially significant by stakeholders as they grant the university (and its graduates) communal status. Here we encounter different ways of conceptualizing universities, both as regards the constitutive question of what makes something a university, and the normative question of what it means to be a good university. The different conceptualizations affect not only to whom the property gets conferred but also what they are enabled or allowed to do, and what they are constrained or prohibited from doing. In short, they affect the resulting social construction of universities.

Multiple Ideas, Uniform Reality

A great variety of agents have standing or authority to confer on institutions the communal and institutional property of being universities. Their conferral reflects a variety of ideas, and an even greater variety emerges once we consider the work of theorists. Yet, global

trends move the acts of conferral along narrow tracks of consumerism and managerialism, antithetical to the idea of university as a public good or an institution for democracy.

Stakeholder Ideas

Stakeholders are "individuals, groups or organizations that have a legitimate interest in the operation of the university" (Jónasson 2008, 72). They include students, their families, faculty, other staff, management, boards, sponsors, alumni, employers, industry, citizens, civic organizations, and authorities of various sorts. Stakeholders find different features of universities socially significant, depending on their interest (Hazelkorn and Gibson 2019). Research is significant from the perspective of knowledge-production, teaching and learning from the perspective of education, and a specialized workforce and marketable innovations from the perspective of industry. The education of informed and reflective citizens, capable of active democratic participation, is significant from the perspective of democracy, and this feature arguably calls for academic freedom and institutional autonomy (De George 2003). Academic freedom is also generally valued by faculty as a stakeholder group, and different groups may prioritize a residential campus, a certain kind of student culture, credentials and career preparation, economic effects, and public service. The parties to the social construction of universities are thus not guided by a homogenous concept.

Theoretical Accounts

The heterogeneity of university ideas is only increased once we move to theoretical accounts. Each university model presents its own judgments of social significance. The Humboldtian idea emphasizes the unity of education and research along with institutional autonomy and academic freedom, the Napoleonic idea prioritizes professional education (Jónasson 2008), Newman (2015/1852) puts transformative personal growth ahead of knowledge production, and Ortega y Gasset (1946/1930) emphasizes culture and professional education. More recently, accounts of the "entrepreneurial university" (Guerrero and Urbano 2012; Rasmussen and Wright 2015) and the "civic university" (Bergan et al. 2016; Goddard 2009; Goddard et al. 2016a) prioritize innovation and responsiveness to society respectively, Boidin et al. (2012) suggest a decolonial "pluriversity", and Barnett (2011) and Collini (2012, 2017) highlight the search for understanding. Barnett (2017) also articulates the "university as debating society", with implications for the democratic role of universities, emphasized by Daniels (2021). Staley (2019) describes no fewer than 13 innovative university models in a single book, many of which are radically different from anything we now usually think of as universities.

The enormous variety of ideas is further reflected in terms such as the 'engaged university' (Hartley 2009), 'deliberate university' (Ricken 2007), 'empowered university' (Hrabowski 2019), 'neo-liberal university' (Sorensen 2015; Skea 2021), 'university of excellence' (Readings 1996), 'unconditional university' (Derrida 2001), 'postmodern university' (Donovan 2013; 2016), 'transactional university', 'global research university', and 'third university'. Cantwell (2021) argues that different empirical studies of universities require different conceptions because universities are "kaleidoscopic organisations" (58).

Fragmentation and Nostalgia

Sociologists describe contemporary universities as fragmented. According to Donovan (2016), the 'postmodern university' is characterized by "heterogeneity and the lack of any central organizing principle" and this has acted to "subvert many of the traditional justifications of the university" (88–89; see also Donovan 2013, and Smith and Webster 1997). Competing accounts of the postmodern university have little in common except a concern with difference, diversity, and fragmentation, together with nostalgia toward more traditional university models (Lanford 2019). The nostalgia may be directed at elements such as the ones Jónasson (2008) identified in the writings of Humboldt, Newman, Whitehead, and Wolff, concluding that "the message coming from these different authors is quite clear: the university is a community of teachers and students whose steady purpose is the acquisition, preservation and transmission of knowledge in the service of mankind" (44). This traditional definition seems far removed from the perceived reality of many working in universities today (Collini 2017; Fleming 2021).

Uniform Realizations

Despite the multitude of ideas, global trends in how universities are in fact constructed have had a homogenizing effect. For decades, these trends have moved universities towards increased corporatization, marketization, and "academic capitalism" (Kwiek 2003; Slaughter and Leslie 1997) that many critics consider destructive to universities' democratic role (Brown 2011; 2015; 2019; Giroux 2007; 2018). Dominant trends include credentialism (Jónasson 2006) and university rankings, leading to competition along narrow parameters of "excellence" (Brink 2018; Hazelkorn 2014; Jónasson 2008), as well as "a neoliberal, marketised logic" (Skea 2021, 400), "the ruthless logic of consumerism" that turns the university into "a bureaucratically-governed, consumer-oriented corporation" (Kwiek 2003, 247).

Commentators describe the fragmented university as a helpless victim of hegemonic forces. Quoting Smith and Webster (1997), Donovan (2016) states that the postmodern university "seems resigned to a pre-set agenda which is narrowly instrumental, one can say passive … but no alternative vision seems to be available" so that "[t]he confidence of intellectuals in their own activities has been reduced and there is no one available to speak for the university" (91). Readings (1996) observed that there is "a deep uncertainty as to the role of the University and the very nature of the standards by which it should be judged as an institution" (1). Academic values are seen as threatened by short-sighted public and private demands for swift, practical results from university activities (Koczanowicz and Włodarczyk 2021). Sorensen 2015), in his attempt to revive interest in the idea of the university, quotes Kristensen's (2011) comment that "the university no longer has any intellectual or ideal justification".

Others have called on universities to break out of their postmodern passivity and "explain to others what they are about" (Jónasson 2008, 72), to "find a new regulative idea" as opposed to having to "accept the rules of bureaucratic, consumer-oriented corporations" (Kwiek 2003, 252). Collini (2012; 2017) articulates a dissident, neo-humanist perspective, attempting to resist the tide of empty managerialism. There is now a renewed interest in the civic and democratic purposes of higher education (Brink 2018; Bergan et al. 2016; Goddard et al. 2016a, b; Goddard 2009). This is reflected in the 2020 revision of the Magna

Charta Universitatum and an increasingly future-oriented critical discourse on the purpose of universities as providers of public goods (Bhattacharya 2018; Daniels 2021; Marginson and Yang 2021).

The discourse on universities thus reflects a strong concern that they have been led astray from the worthy purposes they should be serving. This is a desperate cry for a mobilizing, ameliorative understanding of what universities are for. Such an understanding can play a direct role in the social construction of universities for the sake of fundamental values, including that of democracy.

Universities for the Sake of Democracy

Why Democracy?

Democracy is under threat throughout the world. In a 2018 interview, Amy Gutmann, president of the University of Pennsylvania and author of the seminal work *Democratic Education* (Gutmann 1987), put it like this:

> Given the seismic civic and political shifts we are witnessing even in some of the most stable democratic nations around the world – trends toward tribalism, sharply polarized partisanship, retreats from civic-mindedness, and resurgent specters of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Islamic rhetoric – we would do well to revisit the importance of the democratic goals of education (Sardoc 2018, 247).

Threats to democracy include propaganda (Kloubert 2018; Stanley 2015), polarization (Somer and McCoy 2019), nativist populism (Bergmann 2020), economic inequality, intolerance, hate crimes, distrust of sources of information, disinformation, contests over freedom of speech, and the divides of identity politics (Sardoc 2018). Democracy is vulnerable to information overload (Dryzek et al. 2019), the effects of social media on the flow of information, conspiracy theories, and distrust of democratic institutions. According to the Varieties of Democracy Institute, 36% of the human population lived in autocratizing countries in 2021 (Boese et al. 2022) while only 4% lived in democratizing countries in 2020 (Alizada et al. 2021). Recent titles of the Institute's annual reports are increasingly ominous: *Democracy at Dusk?* (2017), *Democracy for All?* (2018), *Democracy Facing Global Challenges* (2019), *Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows* (2020), *Autocratization Turns Viral* (2021), and *Autocratization Changing Nature?* (2022).

Brown (2011; 2015; 2019) argues forcefully that the movement toward autocracy is partly explained by how higher education has been dominated by a market rationality that continually undermines the educated citizenry necessary for democracy. Giroux (2018) similarly argues that democracy is threatened by "neoliberal savagery and the assault on higher education as a democratic public sphere". University stakeholders, who have the power to construct universities according to valuable purposes, need to pay serious attention to their democratic value.

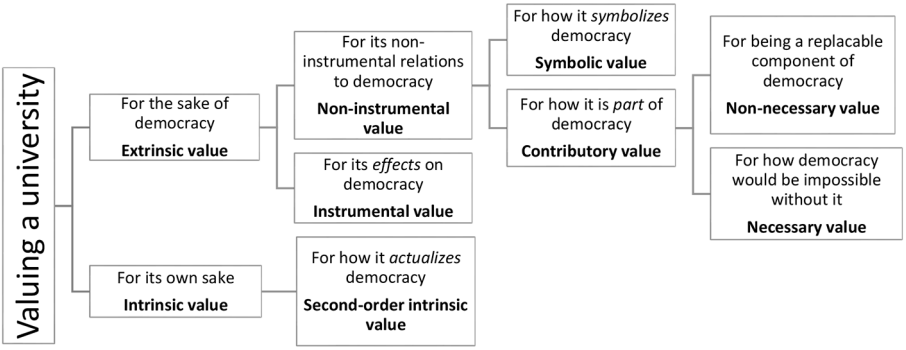

Fig. 1 Valuing universities from the perspective of democracy

The Democratic Value of Universities

Universities, like anything else, can have value either intrinsically or extrinsically (Korsgaard 1983; Langton 2007). They have intrinsic value insofar as they are valuable in themselves, and they have extrinsic value insofar as their value comes from another source. As Ziliotti (2020) explains, extrinsic value can be either instrumental or non-instrumental. Things are valued instrumentally for their effects in bringing about valued states of affairs. A university can thus be considered instrumentally valuable for its effects in bringing about knowledge and innovation, an educated public, informed civic discourse, professional skills and knowledge, social and economic development, etc. Things can also have extrinsic value that is non-instrumental. This holds true of symbolic and contributory value. Flags generally get their value from symbolizing what they stand for, and the wing of an airplane has value in virtue of its contribution to the functionality of the whole plane. Similarly, universities may have value as symbols of national identity or sovereignty, status, progress, modernity, knowledge, wisdom, culture, etc. Universities may also have value in virtue of their contribution to an institutional structure that keeps society functioning. This contributory relation is not that of means to a valuable end but rather that of a part to a valuable whole.

As diagrammed in Fig. 1, Ziliotti's distinctions are helpful for clarifying the ways in which universities may be valued from the perspective of democracy. The most obvious category is that of extrinsic, instrumental value, i.e. valuing universities for the sake of their effects in bringing about, sustaining or enhancing democracy. The operation of universities has many effects that are directly or indirectly beneficial for democracy. Universities produce knowledge that is relevant for public policy, and well-informed public policy is clearly good for democracy. So, when public policy is based on information that originated in universities, they may be valued for their instrumental contribution to democracy. Similarly, when it is claimed that wide access of citizens to university education strengthens democracy by cultivating students' civic skills (Ahier et al. 2005; Evans et al. 2021), or when a particular kind of university curriculum is said to nurture students' skills for active democratic participation (De George 2003; Nussbaum 2010; Roth 2015; Sardoc 2018; Shapiro 2005; Taylor 2010; Zakaria 2016), universities are being valued instrumentally, as tools for shaping the citizenry in ways that enhance democracy. Relatedly, universities can be valued

instrumentally for their role in nurturing the kind of culture (diverse, non-repressive, tolerant, humane, liberal, critical, reflective, deliberative, etc.) that is seen as valuable for democracy (Council of Europe 2016; 2020; Humboldt 1970/1810; Koczanowicz and Włodarczyk 2021; Ortega y Gasset 1946/1930). And insofar as democracy "has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized" (Dewey 1987/1937, 182, quoted by Biesta 2007), universities serve democracy by creating new knowledge about democracy itself, including experimental knowledge (Dryzek et al. 2019; Fishkin 2009) as well as new ways of understanding and interpreting the very idea of democracy.

The extrinsic value of universities for the sake of democracy can also be non-instrumental. Traditions of collegiality, peer review, and peer election may be grounds for valuing universities as symbols of democracy, an "academic republic". Such symbolism may also be discerned from universities as sites of dissent, the free exchange of ideas, and academic freedom. Symbols can of course have inspirational effects and therefore also an instrumental value, which is separate from their purely symbolic value. Furthermore, universities can be valued contributorily, as parts of the whole of democracy. If democracy is viewed as a complex order of political and social institutions, universities may be valued as part of that order, which is different from being a means to it. This contributory value is exemplified by the provision of professional knowledge for public service and perhaps some of the other kinds of knowledge already referred to as having instrumental value. It is also exemplified by what Karl Jaspers called scientific autonomy, understood as "the realization of an international communication net which would protect the free state from the total state" (Habermas 1987, 17). The international formal and informal network of universities may thus be regarded as a sort of insurance for each democracy against falling into authoritarian rule. Universities can be valued contributorily either as necessary or as non-necessary components of democracy, depending on whether one thinks democracy would survive without universities or whether the democratic role of universities might in principle be played by different agents in some other institutional setting.

What about intrinsic value? It may seem difficult to imagine how democracy could have any role in an explanation of the intrinsic value of universities. After all, valuing something intrinsically means valuing it for its own sake and not for the sake of something else. However, as Ziliotti (2020) points out, an institution can be said to possess second-order intrinsic value if it is a necessary part of a valued ideal or translates it into practice. If we believe – as we probably should – a democratic system would not be sustainable without universities, we value universities intrinsically as a necessary part of democracy. If we believe universities translate the value of democracy into practice, then we value universities intrinsically by virtue of this relation to democracy. The examples of collegiality, peer-review, peer-elections, and free debate, already mentioned as possible symbols of democracy, can also be thought of as instantiations of the value of democracy. Universities are then seen as having second-order intrinsic value by virtue of their democratic practices. This applies also to democracy in the classroom and in educational practices generally. It has second-order intrinsic democratic value in addition to whatever instrumental value it may have as civic education or effective pedagogy.

In short, there are several distinct ways in which universities may be valued by virtue of their relation to democracy. Most prominently, they may be valued extrinsically for being instrumental in bringing about, sustaining, or enhancing democracy. But they may also be valued extrinsically as either symbolic of democracy or as a contributory part of a function-

ing democratic system. Finally, universities may be said to have second-order intrinsic value as necessary parts of democracy and for putting democratic values into practice.

Conclusion

In the Radical Transformation scenario laid out in the introductory section, institutional change raises questions about whether the transformed institution should count as a university. With the help of Ásta's conferralist framework, we now see that this is a question for those who have standing or authority to confer university status. It is up to them whether academic freedom and a central concern with knowledge and learning are base properties for the institutional and communal property of being a university. It is also up to them what rights and obligations, enablements and constraints, to confer through their public acts, attitudes, and behavior. Whatever they do will create the social fact of whether the institution is a university and what being a university means in that context. And what they do will reflect their various ideas of a university.

This does not mean that university status should be conferred thoughtlessly or in a normative vacuum. On the contrary, the authority and standing to construct universities carry great responsibility and there is much room for argumentation concerning how to proceed. The Traditional Understanding argument appeals to our current concept of a university: Since Radical Transformation is incompatible with the concept, it would not be a university. On the conferralist framework, this is of course a faulty inference because university status is not determined by the current concept but by stakeholders' public acts, attitudes, and behavior. To make the Traditional Understanding argument more plausible, it might be reinterpreted as cautioning stakeholders not to allow the concept of a university to mutate, jeopardizing the values served by its current use. On this reinterpretation, Traditional Understanding is a conservative, ameliorative argument, ultimately concerned with how the use of the concept serves important values.

Other responses to Radical Transformation might appeal to empirical information. Based on what we know about the empirical relationship between academic freedom and important values, such as the production of knowledge and even democracy, it would be a bad idea to remove academic freedom from our interpretation of what it means to be a university. Arguments of this sort are also ameliorative because they are ultimately concerned with the values at stake in how we develop the idea of a university.

The responsibility of university stakeholders may be clarified through a sports analogy. Official bodies regularly revise the rules of professional sports to make them more valuable. In making these changes, authorities must be sensitive to the interests of stakeholders such as sponsors, media companies, and fans. Rule changes alter the official concept of the sport a bit at a time, making it an evolving concept. These changes in the concept are motivated by the aim of making it as valuable as possible, based on stakeholder feedback. A conceptual approach can be taken at any time if we are only wondering "what is our current concept of this sport?" A descriptive approach can be taken if we want a richer understanding of how the sport is – and has been – played and understood, and to predict consequences of proposed changes. But for anyone interested in the practical question of assessing or even deciding on rule changes, the approach must ultimately be concerned with the value of the concept and hence be ameliorative.

The sports analogy holds insofar as the concept of a university evolves in response to considerations of value. It runs into problems, however, once we consider the heterogeneity of our university concept. Universities are complex organizations, and its stakeholders have widely different ideas of what universities are about. This renders the social category of university fragmented. A university comprises social groups where people's roles are constructed in diverse ways based on various ideas about what values are realized through universities.

The heterogeneity and fragmentation of universities is a source of frustration for those who hope to see in them organizations serving a coherent ideal, such as that of Humboldt or Newman. It may also help explain the ease with which managerial and consumerist trends have infiltrated universities in the absence of a widely supported alternative. But there is a silver lining. Every time the operation of universities is examined critically, we have an opportunity to consider how its shortcomings or strengths affect the values we care about. As university stakeholders, we can ask ourselves what we can do to influence the social construction of those aspects of universities that concern us and resist the trends we see as corrosive. We do not need to wait for authorities or stakeholders with great standing to act, and we do not have to sit and lament the effects of global forces. Instead, we can speak up about our aspirations for the universities we have a stake in, and not be deterred by arguments that merely state our current concept or empirical reality. These aspirations should, I have argued, include a sustained focus on the democratic value of universities.

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