

## "D'Globalization: Yet Another Interrogation of the Globalization Mandate"

By Wendi Adamek

According to material distributed in a recent faculty meeting on a new university initiative, "globalization" is a keyword in the marching orders for an overhaul of Columbia's disciplinary structures. I found myself wondering: is this cutting edge or behind the curve? Are we adapting to the future, or denying it?

It is understandable that institutions are not designed to do other than project the present into the future. The political and humanitarian costs of slowing down are likely to be too overwhelming to tackle directly. Uneasily stirring in a dream of limitless growth, is it waking we want, or more lucid dreaming? Many of the dreams are grand and noble -- yet the same conditions produce both vaccines and crack, the anti-hunger slogans of the "Green Revolution" and the poisons in our soils and cells. Santoshi Kon's anime film *Paprika* captures this endless redoubling of compassion and collusion in a vision of the unleashed dreamtime of a consumer society consuming itself.

Isn't it the function of the university to prepare the young for the future? And isn't it the function of the university to reproduce those who will maintain and improve the system? What if these aims have become incompatible? I'll sketch a version of the worst-case scenario, and then by all means do further research and find out for yourself how far you agree or disagree. (And post your findings/comments, here, please!)

- The massive reductions in consumption and travel that would be necessary to cut carbon emissions in time to prevent a warming feedback loop (90% by 2020) would probably cause multiple global economic crashes, political chaos, and widespread famine.
- So-called sustainables -- wind, hydro, and solar power -- depend on ff (fossil fuel) materials and ff-powered mining to build and replace. Extracting dwindling ffs is increasingly likely to lead to environmental devastation and regional and ideological conflicts.
- Biofuels depend on ff fertilizers (corn) and deforestation (palm oil).

- Safe carbon-sequestration technology does not yet exist. Hydrogen cell technology is not yet efficient (i.e. cannot produce significantly more power than it takes to produce the cells).
- Clean water supplies are degrading rapidly, and the water wars have already begun.

If all of this turns out to be true, how much impact does a major research university have? Understandably, political and corporate leaders want to encourage those who are dedicating their lives to solving these problems. They also tend to support those who are able to give legitimacy to the claim that our problems are merely technological and institutional challenges. Thus, the university is a unique nexus of problem-solvers and legitimacy-builders working alongside whistle-blowers and demolition experts. To put it in a really disgusting way, we feed off the endless problems-effluent of our own way of life.

If it's really so hopeless, is there is no point in imagining alternative disciplinary structures that reflect globalization and other current realities? The university is grappling with difficult dialogues about itself, shouldn't this be encouraged? Or is it simply another distraction?

Here is a summary of the issue as it appears in discussions in our faculty meetings and hallways. The "disciplines" or "traditions" or "area studies" approach to structure creates a landscape of isolated citadels. The "interdisciplinary" approach creates illusory diversity while leaving dominant structures intact. Pluralism comes to seem like an endless entertainment, a glittering reflective surface better able to mirror the market. Yet this monoculture is so well-fertilized that it also produces unprecedented numbers of thick, deep, archival, artisanal, particularized, brave, resistant, and truly different studies.

The university at its best is endlessly unsettling. One of the speakers at the recent "After Pluralism" conference was James Tully, Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Law, Indigenous Governance and Philosophy at the University of Victoria. His title alone is a masterpiece of pluralism and dominant structures.

Tully spoke on the notion of "groundless trust," a phenomenologically recognizable gesture of open-handed approach, an embrace of Wittgensteinian uncertainty, and a humble acceptance of provincialization of one's own Gadamerian horizons in the encounter with the

other “in the space of questions.” Oh, and a Buberian experience of intersubjectivity. His talk was a lucid, simply worded evocation and advocacy of openness, dialogue and non-violence, lightly sprinkled with the foregoing theoretical allusions, and it made the audience squirm.

I felt uncomfortable for several reasons. I thought to myself that if an untenured female professor had given the same idealistic talk, it would have been tantamount to career-suicide. I also admired him for using his secure eminence in this manner, and I questioned myself for doing so. And I also acknowledged the constant “provincialization of horizons” that university life entails. One accepts that cherished aspects of one’s world-view will constantly “come into the space of questions” and get chopped to bits. Constantly encountering alterity, vicious criticism, and, worst of all, polite condescension, it is extremely tempting to make criticism itself into an infinitely involuting horizon. Like capitalism, this is an army continually on the march, crossing and re-crossing territories it will not own but claims to liberate.

In the discussion period following Tully’s talk, several students raised cogent, detailed theoretical questions that trembled with the tension between trust and mistrust that Tully had described. In the well-trained challenges one could hear the underlying plea that he would answer well -- that he would give grounds for hope. The questions boiled down to this: “In today’s world, globalized by a relentless market, isn’t what you are saying hopelessly naïve, outmoded, and ineffective?”

Demonstrating groundless openness, he acknowledged that groundless trust was a kind of spiritual calling, a “binding of oneself” to something larger than the self -- to God if you are a Christian, to Law if you are a Kantian. And he argued that this is not utopian, it is not the old refrain that “another world is possible.” Rather, it is the willingness to recognize that another world is actual, is at work on the ground, under the radar and in the interstices of the dominant paradigm. He argued that there are myriads of small alternative social and economic experiments going on whose effects we cannot foresee.

In different terms, Buddhist practice also calls for a kind of “groundless trust.” The ongoing formation of the “self” is a multidimensional interdependence, but simply understanding that individuality is virtual and constructed isn’t enough. It is necessary to bring the focus of the apparent self to bear on the problem of seeing itself through, turning

the contingent, impermanent structures of self into disciplines. These disciplines allow it to stabilize in the realization of the absence of any ultimate basis for structures, disciplines, and itself.

However, does Buddhist practice also call for recognition that “another world is actual,” and does it call for the disciplines of engagement with this world? But of course, you say. Haven’t we been through all this a million times? Yes, traditional Buddhism doesn’t think much of samsara, but Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) teachings point out that samsara is nirvana, and even though suffering is empty it is *because* things are empty that bodhisattvas practice compassion -- so go get engaged! (But not to the wrong person.)

That’s the question. Is engagement in the structures and disciplines of a university like getting engaged to the wrong person, cultivating the wrong ground? As discussed above, the university as an institution might not be in the best position to acknowledge that the dominant paradigm is screwed. Does it exist primarily to repair or criticize the dominant paradigm? Both, I hear you say. But what if our most trenchant criticisms are more like inoculations, providing just enough of a dose of radicalism to build up antibodies?

But let’s keep interrogating those disciplines. The western university is the child of a quarrelsome marriage between theology and monarchy followed by the long nasty divorce of church and state. It’s a compound of hubris and humility, love of truth and massive insecurity. It exists in a matrix of multiple agendas and desires, wanting to give elites the tools they need to continue to dominate, wanting to defend a space for uncensored exploration, and wanting to expose abuses and lies and improve characters/societies. The structure of university disciplines is not simply a reflection of money and power, it’s a reflection of money and power wishing for a better self/image. Global capitalism and consumerism would like to go on forever, end world hunger and find a cure for cancer, and have more interesting things to say at parties. These desires, some (people at the Earth Institute who shall remain nameless) would say, create a deep-pocketed and powerful impetus for positive change. (See: “The Economics of Climate Change Koan”)

Yet as we ponder the call for globalization in the university, it is clear that breaking down trade-barriers between disciplines will empower some and impoverish others. Without some form of “protectionism,” it becomes extremely difficult to preserve a public trust of truly

diverse intellectual and cultural heritages. Things depend on the engagement of bodies and minds and lived worlds to evolve -- a library alone, like a zoo, does not preserve regenerative diversity, it preserves a memory of its loss. The tricky question is this -- can a department or a life-long vocation, like a nature conserve, create a space for something viable? The worlds that many of us study are long-lost, or have evolved beyond recognition. Does this mean that no environment, no collection of living minds and bodies, should be devoted to these lost worlds? There is no return to the unspoiled environment or the pre-contact tribe. Can we still choose deliberate protection and the setting of limits, or have we accepted that the market is unstoppable?

The shadow of the apocalypse brings us back to the question of religion as a discipline. Why is religion suddenly so visible? People often notice that it has something to do with the oil-saturated ideological conflict between the West and Islam. But is that really all there is to it? Religious and spiritual movements, and denunciations thereof, are sprouting up so fast that it is impossible for a busy faculty to keep track.

Perhaps what we are seeing is a post-modern Ghost Dance, a de-centered millenarian dance of hope and despair. We are a concatenation of people just trying to get by, people deeply invested in the Enlightenment-qua-free market paradigm, people desperately trying to save the paradigm from the monsters it has bred, people who want to party 'till the last minute, and people who hope for a really spectacular crash and a "clean slate." This last group may be the ones to get their wish -- but may not survive the realization of their dreams. And I am absolutely not pointing a finger at Islamic fundamentalists. The open or secret wish for the apocalypse is a siren call tempting to idealists and purists of all kinds, including green ones. As the dangers become clearer, the notion of a clean slate will be more and more seductive to those who can't tolerate mixed results, imperfection, and muddled processes.

And that is why I think it is important that we continue to debate disciplinary structures and go on with our mixed, imperfect, and muddled processes. Perhaps a myriad of muddled processes will connect into something that works. And if the university is going down with the ship, we'll keep playing those old tunes on the deck for those who can't find a lifeboat.