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# The Humanities And The University: Craig Calhoun Interviewed

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education

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**Abstract**

In this interview Craig Calhoun talks about universities, the Humanities and his own research. Universities reinvent themselves in the face of societal and technological change. In the midst of this change, however, universities are charged with maintaining old ideals, with informing the public and creating opportunities for human development. The Humanities often bemoan these changes but they are ideally positioned to contribute to the changing university – especially through teaching – and so protect the traditional place of the university in society. The Humanities must help to defend the canon but, at the same time, be open to new rethinking the canon by embracing alternative epistemologies. One means to do this is to opening knowledge up by embracing languages other than English. Calhoun's own research is focussed on those 'parts of globalisation' that are not commonly investigated: Belonging and Identity, Social Emergencies as an exception; the fragility of Global capitalism.

**Keywords**

Humanities, university, science, internationalisation, emergencies

**(PV):** It is quite fashionable these days to suggest that the university has reached the end of one of its lives. What do you think underlies this thinking and, if it is correct, how do you see the next life of the university?

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**(CC):** Universities need to be reinvented in a lot of cases. I suspect that some small fraction of very elite, very well-off universities in the global north can go along without reinvention. Harvard, for example, is not under the financial pressures, it's not under the enrolment pressures, and the other stresses which most institutions face.

But universities have been reinvented lots of times before. So, although we can point out that it is an ancient institution they don't today have much in common with the University of Paris in the Middle Ages, say. So, we shouldn't be too upset about the fact that there has to be reinvention.

That said, I'm not sure entirely where the reinvention is going to come from because a core academics are sufficiently committed to the institution, as we presently know it, that academic leaders risk trying to defend the university rather than reinvent it. So, in effect we risk being paralysed by nostalgia rather than change.

What are the factors that have brought universities to this point?

First, the expansion of the university sector has transformed it. This expansion in itself was largely a good thing because it created more places, more opportunities for those who were previously excluded from higher education. But among the side effects of opening to more entrants has been to shift the quality of internal debate and to create new kinds of hierarchies. So, for instance, the expanded higher education system worldwide has given rise to these global ranking structures that we often complain about. These aren't just arbitrary signals which are helpful to funders or the media, they are a reflection of the fact that, today, we have an extremely large field of universities globally. Within countries too, the number of universities has also expanded: this has sharpened national competition. So, these days in any given South African city, there may be two or three universities competing for the same pool of funds where once there was only one.

Competition is the second thing: expansion has been organised in such a way that universities are more distinctively competitive. So, universities are arenas of endless competition, internally, the Sciences versus the Humanities is the most obvious example. But externally they are in competition with each other – for students, for prestige, for impact. Previously, all universities were bastions of privilege even if one was more prestigious than the other. Now where you go to university matters but what you study is also important.

Funding regimes have also changed and continue to do so. It's hard to make global generalisations but most places in the world, especially where the more established universities are situated, government funding is either being cut or spread among more universities – or both of these. So competition has simply changed access to public resources which, in turn, have driven other changes. One result is that in some places fees for students have been introduced. For example, the LSE is now majority supported by student fees while a generation ago most of its funding came from the British government. This is not an uncommon pattern, though this case may be an extreme case because the LSE is largely successful in attracting lots of fee-paying students. But it is still a reflection of a shift and a change in university funding. In some parts of the world, the opposite is

happening. In China, the state is building more new universities and putting increased funding into them but this certainly not a universal experience.

Third, there has also been an expansion in the internationalisation of universities: global movement of faculty members, of global competition for prestige and the like. One result of this is that the leading the university of any particular country does not guarantee a place in the leading universities of the world.

And then, we are just beginning to feel the beginnings of a transformation driven by technology. It is however clear that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are not the format in which that particular transformation is going to come. But the debate around MOOCs certainly signals that technology will be transformative to higher education in some form.

Other developments effecting higher education are modes of change – one such example is government policy, especially on the way that university transformation is being managed. Let me be clear: I don't think that governments could have kept the universities the way they were. But government demands for accountability have helped to transform the system – in diverse ways, to be sure – in different countries. Another mode of change is that, nowadays, students are more market oriented. We have to appreciate that this reflects not simply a change in attitudes but is symptomatic of the very expansion I have been talking about. Many students these days are not part of the traditional elite, they're not going to be well off based entirely on their parents' income. For these people, job-oriented study makes sense because they are new to the skills and the middle-class occupations that universities can prepare them. History suggests that it is hard to begrudge those who worry about the market.

Then we have a significant cohort of students who are the children of the university educated and the children of the well off who are working to maintain their status and reproduce it. There may be more pressure for change in this group than we imagine because it may be that this population is like those who, a generation or so ago, went to university without job worries – and looked at different kinds of careers. This was a group that may have said, 'Look, I'm going to do English Literature because I love it and I'll worry about the job later'. But, for them, the world has also changed.

For people our age, give or take a generation, who were formed in the tail end of the great post-war economic boom in most countries, things are different now. This varies from country to country and not only touches universities in the Global North. In a range of southern countries, for a while, there was an optimism about a sort of a development transition that was going to take place: in anticipation of this, the universities were playing a central role in changing everything. So, the development of mass higher education came with the big promise of training of the middle class which would transform economic structures. However, since the 1970s, there has been a switch towards finance-led growth which is not the kind of economic growth that creates new jobs. As a result, the middle classes come under pressures in all sorts of different settings. Naturally, there are different local stories but it is a widespread pattern across the globe: effectively, the economic optimism

of an earlier age has given way to pessimism even as the timelines differ from country to country. The cumulative outcome is that as new forms of inequality confront old ones, global capital is increasing and intensifying wealth divides in most places across the world.

Faced with this, the university spends its time in an increasingly competitive world: who has published in what journal? How many outputs do your universities comparable to mine? As they compete against each other, they reproduce hierarchies. Their students compete and reproduce hierarchies, too. All in higher education are drawn into this.

It's a stretched out kind of hierarchy in which there are lots more differential steps. Unlike in earlier times it is not two, three, four classes that divide places, it's 200 ranking positions and there is great contestation over the space in between.

But even in the midst of this constant change, we need to retain old ideals about higher education, about the importance of informing publics, and the promotion of a public discourse that matters to democracy, of creating opportunities for human development and the like. . .

**PV:** Do the Humanities have a role in this?

**CC:** They do.

I was going to say we should have those ideals *and* we should recognise that our old ways of going about things won't anymore. So the Humanities have an interesting place in this. But first, let me clear some conceptual ground: in South Africa, the Humanities include the Social Sciences while both in the United States and Britain the Social Sciences would distinguish themselves from the Humanities. In what follows, I will use the local nomenclature.

In a lot of places, humanists have taken a somewhat defensive posture like 'we have to protect the old system'. So, in the UK there are pressures to defend the tradition: this is understandable effort because there are many things to be affectionate about in the traditional British university. But this kind of nostalgia ignores the 1960 and 1970's campaigns to transform the university. These, of course, had argued that the old wasn't just such a wonderful model. This suggests that one needs to be aware of the dangers of idealising of a 'golden age'. Humanists, I think, have participated in the golden age thinking about universities more than any other group. That said, humanists have also pioneered the use of new technologies and new modes of scholarly production that promise to democratise the university, to facilitate new kinds of access, to use online media to understand fields like archaeology.

So, often the Humanities are at the cutting edge of couple of rethinkings about the future of the university. One of these is to put education front and centre. Here, the Humanities have been undercut by emulating science-oriented regimes of evaluation, scientific funding regimes and the like. Sometimes, of course, we in the Humanities have been pushed in this direction by government fiat. But, in many ways, we also are complicit in these because we have readily participated in these evaluations and rankings and other sorts of assessment schemes.

The Humanities are ideally positioned to make a deeper transformative contribution to higher education. An important one is to rethink the current tendency to define ourselves as researchers, first, and teachers, second which has betrayed, perhaps, something basic to the Humanities. An alternative way of thinking about the Humanities is to see them as essential in the cultivation of people and of countries: so that what individuals don't get from nature, they get from the culture and cultivation provided by the Humanities. And, on the national level, that which makes a country is not necessarily from an inherited ethnicity, but from the understandings offered by the Humanities. If this is a plausible way of thinking about the Humanities, then the role of teacher is enhanced, even exalted and, as a result, Humanists ought to get a lot of satisfaction from their work. They should get it from pure teaching and from the kind of intellectual exchange and preparation that goes into this.

Think, for example, about Anthropology and History: for each of these disciplines, the mastery of things in which an individual is not necessarily a specialist is substantial. If an individual teaches a subject like 19th-century history, they're not going to do the research on every part of the topic. But part of the pleasure, is gaining the knowledge and being able to think about things you might never write about or lecture about or even discuss with students. Same thing in Anthropology. You might study a people but part of what makes that study come alive is to put it in the context of other ethnographies and other forms of research.

**PV:** But haven't we lost some of the benefit of this perspective in the hyper-specialisation which is so integral to the science model. . .

**CC:** Yes, both in the science model, and funding regimes put pressure on to academics go out and get outside grants. So I worry, not that outside grants are a bad thing and not that we don't want national funders to fund our fields more, but that Humanists re-embrace the science model only as second class citizens. Part of what we should be struggling for in the reinvention of the university is an 'education first' understanding of it.

If we accept an understanding of the university as a research institution which contributes to local economic growth, which also happens also to teach students, we all lose, I think. As we do so, we sacrifice the opportunity to contribute to things that the Humanities can distinctively offer to the lives of individual and to the larger society. The thing I want to emphasise is this: don't buy into the idea that teaching is what you are employed to do, only if you are not getting enough support for your research!

**PV:** This is interesting because it has immediate relevance to in this country where teaching should, ideally, be the one central pillars of the university because of the poor quality of the undergraduate student.

You have certainly laid down a challenge for South Africans to rethink their priorities on these issues. . . .

**CC:** I hope so. I think it is true elsewhere too – certainly both in the US and in the UK. It should, of course, be true wherever professionals are concerned about the social value of what they do, or whether they are concerned about linking their

intellectual excitement to the sheer pleasure that draws us into our respective callings. There is so much to be optimistic about in this particular vision of higher education, but there is, however, also be terrible debased – almost dystopian – versions of the same thing. One might easily imagine a narrow bean-counting approach to teaching – one, that makes classes bigger and simply processes students through their education. In this approach, students might get professional degrees, but they're not educated. As I have suggested, it does not have to be this way.

I don't think that there is a great opportunity for selling the Humanities entirely on their contributions to economic growth or to organise them entirely on extra-university research funding. In fact, it will be hard to salvage, the Humanities in this particular way if this was found to be necessary because it would change the Humanities by selling them in ways that will alter them.

That doesn't mean that it isn't wonderful for the occasional person to get a research professorship in the Humanities and that we shouldn't like to have some of those people in our midst contributing great things. It means only that it can't possibly be the general model.

**PV:** A slice of the conversation at this conference has been that the Humanities and, indeed, all the Sciences rest on a Western archive, use a Western epistemologies, etc. Do you think that in a country, like South Africa, we should be exploring, an understanding of ourselves within our particular African context?

**CC:** Let me turn this into two questions. One of them is about what inherited past we claim; the other is about what we create now.

It's true that the archive, the canon, has been disproportionately Western – that's partly bad, partly not. Moreover, it is important to try to broaden and diversify and rethink the canon, though that doesn't just mean not teaching Shakespeare. It does however mean teaching Shakespeare with different eyes and looking at the issues of race as they appear in Shakespeare, or the issues of Britain's emerging colonial role as this appears in Shakespeare. The point is this: rethinking of the canon isn't the jettisoning it. There is a certainly a history to be claimed beyond the Western canon, but not instead of it!

Instructively, in Asia and in a variety of other non-Western settings, there is a great deal of appropriation of the Western canon that has become the global canon, because it offers a pathway for people move into things. In certain careers, like business, it matters whether an individual, from a different background, understands some of the accepted canon before becoming, say, an executive in global corporations or joining a global business board.

In terms of what we in the Humanities do however, I think there are different issues at work because what we do has to embrace the contemporary, the immediate. What we explore has to be an interaction between the local and the global which, in my view, needs to include the national. The latter is important because there is a form of global cosmopolitanism, these days, that devalues the idea of the national project – in my view, this a mistake because it takes away the resources to create better, more inclusive national self-understandings. The national provides the essential tools that connect the exploratory work of artists, and authors, and

analysts, and scholars, and researchers in South Africa – as an example – to what is going on elsewhere in the world. So I wouldn't move away from all the inheritances as we are engaged in the production of the new. There are real opportunities for the Humanities around these issues even though questions about who will pay for this work are not clear!

But the idea of the shaping of a self-understanding that deals with national problems, say, of relations among different communities, of inequality or the shape of cities is central for any country even as it carves out its relations to others.

**PV:** This raises the question of the language of knowledge, doesn't it. More and more English is the lingua franca of the global academy. In the context of local knowledge and the role of the university within the national state, how does one deal with language issues?

**CC:** South Africa, of course, has a version of this, doesn't it?

Despite the ongoing protestations over Afrikaans the issue of language in South Africa is not as acute as some other places where there is now a devalued national language and people are imposing completely foreign languages so that scholars can't get credit for publishing in the local language. Because English is a language of South Africa: indeed, in the last century, South African writers have been some of the most important writers in the English language you are at a distinctive advantage in this country.

But, the diversity of languages that are relatively marginalised is a big issue for the academy as a whole. As I'm no expert on it, but the place of Afrikaans as a language associated with the apartheid regime but a language of considerable literary accomplishment – which has its own scholarly and intellectual traditions – presents particular challenges. As, of course, do the place of African languages which have substantial linguistic communities with real literary and oral traditions. The latter languages, moreover, are the formative languages of university students. I think that there has to be some kind of recognition, engagement and incorporation of different languages into both research and teaching in order to fully empower students but also to contribute to creating a South African identity.

What form that takes an outsider can't say. How much is it about bilingual work? How much is it about having scholarly posts for people studying the intellectual traditions in differently languages? How much is it just recognising the place of different languages, which is a problem of bureaucracy? What languages are forms printed in the government office? So, it appears not to be just a problem in the academy.

Language is big area that humanists ought to be working on. I got interviewed last night by a TV station (and was asked) 'What are the things that the Humanities contribute to people on the street?'. I mentioned the issue of understanding multiplicity of languages and learning how to work with them. Then somebody this morning on the panel said, 'One of the things we haven't done is really confront the issue of language'.

So, I don't know how much the language issue has been thought about in this country, but it's plainly a basic issue.

**PV:** Nowadays, you are an academic administrator now but, as you demonstrated in your presentation to the conference, you remain committed to research. Can you say something about your current work?

**CC:** Yes, I try to continue my research but, of course, it increasingly takes place in the hours after midnight.

Currently, I am interested in three aspects of the same thing, namely, the how we understand those parts of globalisation that are not commonly picked up on. One of these is the relationship between cosmopolitanism and belonging which we have already touched upon. Belonging is actually a term that exists and is, I know, significantly debated in South Africa. But this is not true everywhere. There are places that are just not part of the debate on belonging.

My research worries are about the idea – held by many Humanists – that we can somehow give up all other forms of belonging and become completely cosmopolitan. This move, of course, is a ruse to an escape from old cultural habits. But, of course, such a move simply creates a new culture – cosmopolitan culture – which has its own form.

The second research interest is around the ways in which we relate Emergencies to systemic change on a global level. In my conference presentation I spoke about the issue of humanitarianism which is inherent in the idea of Emergencies. Let me stay with this example to illustrate some of my worries. Invariably, the public are presented – through the media, lots of organisations, NGOs, governments and other global players – with a universe of Emergencies. It is a conceptual universe of short term, sudden, unpredictable events that demand attention while, at the same time, precluding any analysis of the deeper structures that keep producing the Emergencies – and, disproportionately, keep them located in the Global South, or focussed on the poor in the Global North.

So, this question that is front and centre: how is it that we have a way of thinking and imagining the world as a place of Emergencies, but which obscures and undermines the analysis of the very system which produces them? Moreover, when you shift the grammar of, say, a Humanitarian Emergency to something like the financial crisis. In this case, the latter are presented as ‘accidents’ or as ‘exceptions’ to the way capitalism operates. As a result, the most important point is missed – contemporary capitalism is in a perpetual state of emergency!

This raises the third domain of my research interest: looking into the fragilities of global capitalism’s relationship to externalities like climate change and capitalism’s relation to other forms of crises.

Although isolating the three of these, each as version of the same thing. It is not just that they are easily solvable: a complicating issue is that critics often present them as simply a governance problem: ‘If we just get global governance right, if we

beef up the IMF, do this and that, we will solve the problems.' We won't, of course. So, this approach does not present an adequate solution.

For 40 years we have been engaged in a discussion of, and a learning about, what we have come to call globalisation and, yet, this thinking has produced some blind spots and some odd perspectives, on the left as well as on the right of the political spectrum.

**PV:** This seems to be relatively pessimistic field of research, it is...?

**CC:** Could be, though my attitude is still pretty optimistic. So, I was very much a youthful, romantic idealist. And I remain a chastened builder, a romantic idealist. I was more clearly Marxist in my youth and have become what I guess can be called post-Marxist but, not some other things. I am still shaped by that perspective but looking at the limits that offer and so try to understand social puzzles from various perspectives, too. Some of the animation behind this kind of thinking is the world has all but lost the idea of a real possibility of major systemic difference on how we think about contemporary capitalism following the crisis of socialism and communism which brought down the Berlin Wall. We have a lot of versions of what would be liberal capitalism to be – what would be more state-run capitalism, what would be different kinds of capitalisms. But we don't really have any imaginary of other kind of social organisation right now.

So, yes, my youthful idealism informs this sense of what the problems are in our world today and I remain optimistic. My analyses keep pushing me to think harder and deeper. Moreover, as an academic leader I respond by saying, alright, what can we do? Can we find other revenue streams? Are there ways in which we can mitigate the effects of inequality? And, is there creative, good role to play by the academy globally?

But I am very conscious that in these are uphill battles.

**PV:** Thank you very much.

### **Author's Note**

Craig Calhoun is one of the world's foremost social thinkers and theorists; a one-time president of the Social Science Research Council, he was University Professor of the Social Sciences at New York University and Director of NYU's Institute for Public Knowledge. At the time of this interview, Calhoun was Director and President of the London School of Economics (LSE). Currently, he is the President of the Berggruen Institute, Los Angeles, and a Centennial Professor at the LSE.

This interview was conducted on the fringes of the Academy of Science South Africa (ASSAf) conference, ON BEING CONTROVERSIAL: THE HUMANITIES REACH OUT in June, 2014, at which Calhoun was the Keynote Speaker.

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