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**The 'Feminine' University: exploring the possibilities of radically re-thinking higher education within a Cixousian theoretical framework (0203)**

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This paper steps outside conventional discourse in order to offer an alternative reading of the challenges facing higher education. By employing a theoretical framework usually associated with literary theory we draw attention to the basic assumptions that underpin debates on higher education.

We argue that ideas about knowledge, teaching and learning have come to be tied to 'masculine' concepts of property and ownership. Such an economy maintains traditional hierarchies and limits our ability to imagine and construct different ways of working and practising. Hélène Cixous' (1975/1986) notion of 'the realm of the gift', in which she imagines a possible alternative 'feminine' economy based on generosity, hope and transformation, offers a way out from such restrictions. We argue that through the creation of 'feminine' spaces within universities new ways of thinking and acting can begin to flourish and the modern university can become a place where real transformative learning can emerge.

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### **Outline**

Recent political initiatives<sup>1</sup> relating to the future of higher education in the UK have moved higher education institutions (HEIs) towards activities that involve the production, exchange and transfer of knowledge in the service of employers and the community at a rate that is unprecedented<sup>2</sup>. Whilst some of these developments have been met with a certain degree of resistance, such resistance seems to be based on nostalgic notions of a liberal education without a great deal of challenge to the reproductive nature of that system - that is to say, the way that it replicated and amplified unequal distribution patterns of pre-existing capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Dialectical debate presents both models as mutually exclusive and there seems to be little room for a radical re-imagining of what higher education could be. One way of escaping this circular and restricted argument is to draw on perspectives that are not usually accessed as part of the debate. The work of the French post-structuralist writer Hélène Cixous consistently exposes and challenges the assumptions that underpin Western philosophy and the ways that it is manifested in academic

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<sup>1</sup> For example the recent (2009) change in the government department responsible for HEIs from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform

<sup>2</sup> For example in the way that significant core funding is being allocated to knowledge transfer partnerships as well as community-based models of knowledge transfer such as the £3m South East Coastal Community Project and the £9.4m Beacons for Public Engagement Project.

discourse and practice. In her ground breaking essay 'Sorties' (1975/1986) she pays particular attention to the way that thinking is ordered around a series of oppositions<sup>3</sup>, all of which are hierarchically arranged and all of which are reducible to a basic one - man/woman. Such thinking – which she characterizes as 'masculine' emanates from a logocentric preoccupation with the self as separate and self interested; it centres on property. She demonstrates the ways that hierarchy, exclusion and oppression are outcomes of such a world view. Cixous proposes a radical alternative - a 'feminine' economy in which opposites co-exist without attempts to dominate, destroy or colonize each other and in which the gift is given without thought of return. Throughout her work the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' are used notionally and metaphorically and in ways that are mostly do not correspond with conventional usage of those words<sup>4</sup>. In this paper we adopt Cixous' notion of femininity to challenge higher education to confront its limits. This is not a paper about gender in higher education, though. Here her ideas about two competing 'economies' – masculine and a feminine - are adopted as a framework within which to explore ways of re-thinking the possibilities of higher education in terms of its purpose and practice.

### Knowledge as Property

Cixous draws on the fiscal metaphor throughout *Sorties* (1975/1986) to advance her vision for a new world (dis)order. The difference between society as it has been since "Ancient History" (p. 83) and the utopia she envisages is the difference between two financial systems – the masculine economy and the economy of the feminine. She seeks to imagine a world where property becomes redundant to the superior possibilities set out by the gift. The impossibility of the gift existing within a masculine economy (because it is always given with the expectation of some return) is the origin of all inequality, she argues:

"All the difference determining history's movement as property's movement is articulated between two economies that are defined in relation to the problematic of the gift." (p.80)

In the feminine economy the gift is given without thought for return. As Massey (2003, p. 20) points out, "Cixous's feminine giver seeks not for a direct return or profit, but to establish (social) relations through the act of the gift."

### Challenging Higher Education

Economic terms and metaphors proliferate in the modern entrepreneurial university. The masculine economy is in evidence in many aspects of its work. Knowledge is produced, owned, transferred & exchanged as a commodity within the university and beyond. Significant resources are poured into the seeking out, combating and punishment of plagiarism and other infringement of intellectual property rights. Competition between universities is taken to be natural given the assumption that they are operating within a market. Existing hierarchies between institutions are replicated by funding arrangements with very few exceptions breaking historical, hierarchical patterns<sup>5</sup>. Teaching is described in linear, objective-led and atomised ways in policy and validation documents. Students

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<sup>3</sup> (such as "activity/passivity" and "culture/nature")

<sup>4</sup> The majority of the writers she cites as examples of l'écriture féminine are biologically male, for example.

<sup>5</sup> The correlation between membership of the Russell Group, heritage and allocation of research funding, for example.

themselves are increasingly regarded as consumers (indeed many regard themselves as such) and so value for money and consumer rights take precedence over discourses around learning and knowledge. Viewed like this, work, practice and culture in higher education can be reduced to a set of binaries that mirror those set out by Cixous in the opening section of her essay. They might be characterized thus, for example:

Teacher/Student

Management/Academic

Research/Teaching

Academic/Administrative

Knowledge/Skills<sup>6</sup>

### Re-imagining the university in a feminine economy: some ideas for work beyond the binaries

In the 'feminine' university:

1. Difference<sup>7</sup> and struggle is celebrated as the source of creativity and transformational learning;
2. Knowledge becomes Cixous calls "a passionate act of co-construction" rather than property of one individual or another;
3. Boundaried identities (academics, administrators, managers, front-line support staff) are reappraised and instead work takes place across and beyond separate, fixed identities;
4. Boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' the university are more permeable;
5. Learning becomes a process of unknowing<sup>8</sup> rather than the acquisition of knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> adapted from Hélène Cixous' (1975/1996) 'Sorties'

<sup>7</sup> As Blake puts it "Without Contraries, no progression"

<sup>8</sup> In the sense that St John of the Cross ("I came into the unknown/ and stayed there unknowing/ rising above all science") uses the term or the way that Keats wrote about "negative capability".