

**DRAFT**

European Association for Social Anthropology  
2016 Annual Meeting

Milan, July 20-23

Panel: *Anticipatory knowledge: prognostics and prophecy in  
management and governance*

**THE UNIVERSITY OF PLANNING**

David A. Westbrook<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

An important site for the anticipation and, crucially, production of anticipatory (or desired) knowledge (or commitment) is the contemporary university, at least as instantiated in the United States. Following Lyotard and Reading, my recent work remarks the shift from the university of culture, centered on *Bildung* and the figure of the professor, adorning and fostering the nation's elite, to the administrative university, centered on excellence and the bureaucratic manager, building brand in a global competition for prestige. In the contemporary university, anticipation of future demands by various stakeholders, including students, government agencies, entities that wish to use university personnel or facilities for research and are willing to pay for it, vague invocations of society itself (leadership and innovation will be required), and occasionally even faculty, are said to require statements of mission and elaborate strategic plans. In the formulation of such statements and plans, democracy and especially diversity are said to require broad based participation. Such statements and plans, however, are rarely used to communicate with stakeholders, at least not directly, because they are virtually unreadable. Instead, the process of their creation, through countless committees, endless meetings, and ultimately unbearably long and anodyne reports, creates commitment by the participants, who cannot say they have had no opportunity to express their views. Prognostication thus shades into planning which does much to constitute the organization itself. Institutional prudence and changing circumstances mandate

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis A. Del Cotto Professor, University at Buffalo School of Law, State University of New York. My thanks to Philip Pierre for research assistance. The mistakes, as always, are mine.

that strategic planning never conclude. The corporate retreat lasts forever; anticipation of the future is the future.

\* \* \*

To begin with a line from the long abstract for this panel: "We work from the assumption that scenarios for the future are far from innocent exercises of imagination." Much of the abstract itself, however, seems to be quite innocent, or at least trusting. The panel is invited to take organizational scenarios for the future at more or less face value, as efforts to model or otherwise represent the world that is to come, that is, to anticipate *facts*, things about which one may have *knowledge*, even if the facts have not yet fully emerged. The point of such scenarios is practical: to inform rational decision and collective action, to shape the world. This is the self-presentation of the modern public servant, of rational bureaucracy. Imagining the future in this or that way -- more grandiosely, deciding that one knows the future, hence anticipatory "knowledge" -- informs and legitimates today's decisions. So imaginations have consequences, and therefore are not "innocent." But, the abstract seems to be assured, bureaucratic efforts at anticipatory knowledge are made in good faith.

All of this may be true. Some of my best friends are bureaucrats. In teaching law, I attempt to educate bureaucrats. And surely organizations, like people, must anticipate the future if they are to make their way in the world. By the same token, most of the time, we must take language at more or less face value . . . Those things

said, after Brexit and generally, can we really simply understand "anticipatory knowledge" as a product of good faith institutional effort? Or -- to give my argument away for this audience -- don't we hear Weber crying out for Foucault? I would like to suggest that "anticipatory knowledge" is hardly innocent not just in its consequences, which is how I read the abstract for this panel. The institutional production of anticipatory knowledge is often, perhaps always, a technique of management, of control, and a way to constitute the institution itself. In this view, the future is often not just the field of anticipatory knowledge, but more importantly the source of authority and the occasion for its exercise.

Let me articulate this thought in a context familiar to this audience, the contemporary university, though I am confident other institutions would exhibit similar dynamics. Of course, in thinking about "the university," and despite considerable experience elsewhere, I somewhat inescapably end up thinking about "universities as they exist in the United States," which admittedly exhibit some local peculiarities. That said, I am fairly confident that most, if not all, of what is said below can be found in many universities around the world.

Following Lyotard, Readings, and others since, my recent work remarks a shift in the *idea* of the university, from the university of culture, centered on *Bildung* and the figure of the professor, adorning and fostering the nation's elite, to the administrative university, centered on excellence and the bureaucratic manager,

building brand in a global competition for prestige.<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, other ways of understanding the historical development of the university and its relations to national and transnational societies. Francisco Ramirez emphasizes that the contemporary university tends to be more of an organizational entity, embedded in society, than its "ivory tower" forebears, somewhat buffered by Church, State, and endowment.<sup>3</sup> Inclusion -- actually, the desire to be seen as inclusive -- has replaced the frank elitism of an earlier era.<sup>4</sup> Higher education, or at least the opportunity for such education, is seen as a human right, even as such education works to create and legitimate hierarchies, especially those of employment. Although employment is the most commonly cited "use" or "purpose" of contemporary higher education, it is hardly the only one. Through research, the university as an institution is associated with material progress, and even "making a difference," a sort of secular redemption. These associated understandings of the emergence of the contemporary university share something important for present purposes: they are oriented to, and seek to justify themselves by, their claims on the future.

All of this is familiar, albeit from the history of business in competitive markets and especially the financing of such businesses, rather than the history of

---

<sup>2</sup> For discussion and citation, see David A. Westbrook, "Critical Issues in Qualitative Research," *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed., ed. Norman Denzin & Yvonne Lincoln (forthcoming). Draft available on request.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco O. Ramirez, "The Socially Embedded American University: Intensification and Globalization," Invited Lecture at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Francisco O. Ramirez, "The Rationalization of Universities," pp. 225-244 in Marie-Laure Djelic and Kerstin Shalin-Andersson, eds. *Transnational Governance: Rise and Institutionalization*. Cambridge University Press. 2006.

the university. By definition, investment entails claims (at least hopes) about future states of affairs -- anticipatory knowledge, at least to the moral certainty of "putting your money where your mouth is," to use an old idiom. That is, businesses construct themselves, and seek investment, on the basis of being able to meet the demands and exploit the opportunities that the future will present. (Anticipatory knowledge is inherent in finance.<sup>5</sup>) Similarly, in the contemporary university, anticipation of future demands by various stakeholders, including students who wish to be employed, government agencies, entities that wish to use university personnel or facilities for research and are willing to pay for it, vague invocations of society itself (leadership and innovation will be required), and occasionally even faculty, are said to require intense engagement with the future, bureaucratically expressed as statements of mission and elaborate strategic plans. Administrators, for their part, wish their institutions to be widely seen as excellent at whatever is widely valued in medium term, signified ("validated") by prizes, grant money, rankings, high rates of application, and the like.

The emergence of the contemporary university -- the shift from professor to administrator (Lyotard) -- thus entails a rather profound shift in the intellectual temporality of academic life. While the university of culture may have participated in a society's history, building citizens and doing research, and in that sense participated in a narrative stretching into the future, scholarship and teaching were

---

<sup>5</sup> Sensitivity to time is key to understanding the appeal, and the dangers, entailed in financial markets. See Westbrook, *OUT OF CRISIS: RETHINKING OUR FINANCIAL MARKETS* (Paradigm/Routledge: 2010).

traditionally thought to be *about* something existent. The grand journal of science is aptly named *Nature*, i.e., there is a world, and the job of the scientist is to understand it. To attend to a text is to affirm the substantive importance of what was written, existing, not anticipated. The owl of Minerva flies at night. And so forth.

In contrast, from the perspective of the university administration, like that of the management of an operating company, the critical question is future demand. The external task is to amass the capital (not just money, evidenced by investment, but social capital of various sorts, for which "brand" is a fine shorthand) necessary to make the university a plausible supplier, so that the institution flourishes.<sup>6</sup> This is "leadership." So, for homely example, law schools may see themselves as needing to anticipate what "lawyer" will come to mean in the next decades, and needing to establish a reputation for training people so that they get such jobs. (Contrast what one might have said in another era: study law because it is important, august, maybe even holy.) That is, anticipatory knowledge characterizes the contemporary administrative university in ways that it did not characterize the university of culture, centered on the professor who understood rather than anticipated.

But if the *external* task for the administrative university is acquiring the status (various forms of capital) required to meet societal demands, then the *internal* task is maintaining the organizational capacity (labor, in the old view) to deliver. In doing so, especially universities, but also other institutions with large

---

<sup>6</sup> For a fascinating account of the global shift in university symbols from "seals" towards essentially corporate "brands," see Giuseppe Delmestri, Gili Drori & Achim Orberg, "Branding the University: Relational Strategy of Identity Construction in a Competitive Field, in TITLE, Sir Peter Scott and Lars Engwall (eds.), Portland Press.

numbers of relatively autonomous, intelligent, professional or at least highly trained members, face a structural problem: the same qualities of autonomy, intelligence, and specialized training that make members valuable to the institution also make their disagreement and even disobedience or simple inaction likely. Consequently, the organization may find it difficult to act collectively, i.e., as an institution. In the US and probably elsewhere, this is colloquially known as the problem of "herding cats."

A key managerial response to this problem is the ritualized collective production of anticipatory knowledge, often called a "strategic planning process." The process usually begins with the establishment of a number (often a large number) of committees, which tend to have rather vague and overlapping assignments. Obviously, who gets appointed where is important. At least from the perspective of the administration, key positions should be filled by allies or at least dutiful souls.

Even more important to the success of the strategic planning process than careful appointment, however, is widespread participation. "It is important that every (your) voice be heard." Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, participants are encouraged to believe that they may have the idea that saves the institution. Conversely, not wishing to participate, or not taking participation seriously, would seem to indicate bad manners, a lack of collegiality, even a certain antidemocratic spirit, perhaps even antipathy to the ideas of others. Being against the ideas of others, against diversity, is a very bad thing indeed. Participation is thus presented

as flattering and as an institutional, even moral, obligation of membership in the organization.

Given the importance of participating, strategic planning processes therefore often incorporate opportunities for self-nomination to committees, and a sufficient number of committees to require widespread, sometimes universal, involvement. More generally, precisely because it is important that every voice be heard, the process must be designed to provide opportunities for all concerned to express themselves. If a member does not avail herself of the opportunity to make herself heard, then she has no right to complain about the decisions eventually taken. (In the English tradition of legal pleading, this is a form of "estoppel.")

Suitably constituted, the committees typically engage in a period of fact finding about the strengths, weaknesses, and direction of the institution. Fact finding is often done via surveys or interviews, and sometimes outside reading or other research into the situations of comparable institutions. Perhaps there are spreadsheets. All of this "data" forms a record on the basis of which proposals can be made. It is important to note that the record is both factual (these are in fact the responses that people made when asked; these are said to be "best practices") and collective (everyone participated, or had the opportunity to do so). The record is thus difficult to dispute (this is what everyone thinks). On the basis of such a record, proposals are articulated, and often floated back to the membership of the institution for further discussion, before being reported "up" to a central committee or directly to the institution's leadership.

In a related but more dramatic and expensive process, institutions sometimes formulate strategy, or suggest outlines of a strategy to serve as the basis for further work in committee, at a "strategic retreat." The idea of withdrawal from the world in order to discern what really matters is familiar; most religions have an ascetic aspect. But "the retreat" as understood in the context of strategic planning is a churchly rather than a monastic enterprise: after the retreat, the members of the firm return to the world, their bonds to one another renewed through "team building." That is, the purpose of the retreat, in some contrast to strategic planning more generally, is often explicitly institutional.

In US business culture, the idea of the retreat has been traced to the "Hawthorne Experiments." In the 1920s, at the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company (a subsidiary of AT&T), Harvard Business School professor Elton Mayo and his colleagues attempted to assess relationships among worker productivity, job satisfaction, and workplace organization. Beginning in the 1930s, Mayo began conducting "retreats" to bring managers together with workers in order to discuss better ways of doing things, with the aim of increasing job satisfaction and, ultimately, productivity. Mayo's retreats were tremendously influential, and were attended by representatives of the leading American corporations of the day. The practice of retreating has since spread to encompass institutions of all sorts, including universities.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See RICHARD GILLESPIE, *MANUFACTURING KNOWLEDGE: A HISTORY OF THE HAWTHORNE EXPERIMENTS* 8 (Louis Galambos & Robert Gallman eds. 1991).

Retreats are often "facilitated," i.e., tightly scripted by a paid outside consultant. A longer version of this paper would describe, in some detail, the techniques used by facilitators to generate acceptable consensus among the members of an organization. For present purposes it suffices to say that the techniques of universal participation ("we want every voice to be heard"), staged responses ("what are three positive aspects and three problems with the proposal?"), and selective summation and editing ensure that the retreat issues in a closing document that reflects the premeditated circumstances of its composition. Like a lawyer's question, the well-run retreat generates the answer for which it was designed.

More generally, strategic planning results in texts that ostensibly memorialize the collective consensus reached through the process, and that thereby seem to justify the process itself. Such texts are, symbolically if not actually, the products of the process. Not incidentally, such texts are also the generally well printed and brightly colored work product of any outside consultants or facilitators, for which fees are paid, even by cash-strapped institutions (which clearly need a better strategy, no?). Ubiquitous examples of such texts are "mission statements" (generally short and broad and unobjectionable, often written to receive favorable vote by a board), detailed in "strategic plans" (much longer) and concretized by "implementation strategies" (randomly detailed and often impossible). Mission statements tend to be so vague and hortatory as to be virtually meaningless. Strategic plans and implementation strategies are often said to be "dynamic," that is,

subject to interpretation and modification as circumstances dictate, in the discretion of management, that is, also not to be relied upon in any concrete sense.

Nonetheless, the crafting of such texts typically receives considerable care. Although it is important that every voice be heard in the establishment of consensus, the actual formulation of texts is done by senior management, often with the assistance of outside consultants. The text is invariably presented, however, as the sense of the body, which just so happens to coincide with the hopes and expectations of management. At this juncture in the process, it is time to congratulate all concerned for their collegiality and hard work.

Apart from providing a deliverable for the justification of fees, such texts, once completed, serve little or no purpose. As suggested, mission statements are often so vague as to be meaningless. Therefore mission statements may safely be transmitted, or even publicly published, e.g., on the institution's website, for whatever the words may be worth. Although there is often a public (anodyne) version of a strategic plan, the preparatory work, details of strategic plans, and especially plans for implementation are likely to be viewed as proprietary, presented as if they conferred a competitive advantage over rival institutions, which often are engaged in substantively indistinguishable strategic planning processes. (In recent years, countless institutions have had a strategic plan entitled 20/20 -- the convergence of the calendar with the standard measure of eyesight evidently is irresistible to consultants. Of course, 20/20 literally means average . . . ) Within the institution, strategic plans may be referred to in cursory fashion by management as

it announces a *new* decision ("in furtherance of our strategic plan and in line with what we decided at last year's retreat, \_\_\_\_\_"). In brief, planning documents do not communicate much to the members of the organization, or other stakeholders, much less represent anticipated knowledge, not least because the documents tend to be vague, disjointed, often unrealistic, and generally unreadable, to say nothing of non-binding. Nothing is so out of date as last year's strategic plan for the next several years. Since nobody believes the plans, which say everything and nothing, the plans themselves "die a death," as the Scots say.

Since the planning documents are moribund, however, the institution needs . . . more plans. It is naive to the point of wrongheadedness to understand most strategic planning documents to be actual plans, that is, good faith representations of anticipatory knowledge and decisions based upon such knowledge, even if the documents are presented in that fashion. Instead, the process of document creation, through countless committees, surveys and interviews, endless meetings, money spent on consultants who have new ideas for "ideation" and the like, and ultimately unbearably long and anodyne reports, creates commitment by the participants, who cannot say they have had no opportunity to express their views. Such participation is presented in terms of representation, but perforce must also be understood in terms of time, responsibility, and complicity. The cats (faculty) may not march together in lockstep, but they have little grounds on which to disagree. Conversely, the administration has a ready-made legitimation for the policy *du jour* ("As we agreed in the strategic planning process . . .").

Since the point of "strategic planning" is not anticipation of the future, but construction of the organization, planning is its own reward. The future will no doubt bring surprises; plans will have to change. But anticipating the future is hardly the point of planning. Universities and other institutions plan in large part because such planning provides a decent semblance of agency to those who need such things for their self-respect, job satisfaction, and ultimately, productivity in the terms demanded by the institution.

Prognostication thus shades into planning, a ritualized process of anticipatory knowledge generation, which does much to constitute the organization itself. Institutional prudence to say nothing of changing circumstances mandate that strategic planning never conclude. The corporate retreat lasts forever; anticipation of the future is the future. To be catty.