Values and Aims of Higher Education: The Case of Ernst Jünger, “Total Mobilisation”, and Academic Philosophy

Author: Ian James Kidd

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There is much discontent with British academia at the moment. The last thirty years have witnessed the funding abyss of Thatcher’s Britain and its mass closure of departments, and the encroaching managerialism, ‘strategic planning’, and omnipresent concern with outputs, metrics, and ‘performance’ of Blair’s government. Such phenomena are familiar and depressing enough and this paper will not dwell upon them; criticisms of ‘outputs’, ‘impact’, and metrological exercises like the Research Excellence Framework are familiar to British academics, and the subject of a variety of practical, political, and philosophical objections. The aim of this paper is not to add to the familiar arguments for or against such trends in higher education policies, but, rather, to offer what is hopefully an original and illuminating perspective upon them. I suggest that many trends in contemporary British higher education can be fruitfully understood using the political philosophy of the early 20th century German writer, philosopher, and cultural critic Ernst Jünger (1895-1998). If this claim is correct, it should offer new and fruitful criticisms of certain prevailing trends in higher education, and hopefully demonstrate that the disciplines of history and philosophy can draw upon their own
intellectual resources to protect themselves against the deleterious trends which, many scholars agree, are jeopardising their professional and scholarly integrity. I begin with an account of Jünger's political philosophy, with special attention to his idea of 'total mobilisation', and, once this is in place, use it to model contemporary British higher education policies. This exercise is not intended to be either exhaustive or definitive, but should provide a novel perspective and, perhaps, an engaging one.

The changes in the recent history of British higher education are affected by many political, economic, and cultural reasons for these transformations of academia, too many to rehearse here. Despite their complexity, however, they are arguably reflective of a broader trend which itself finds precedent within the history; more specifically, my claim is that the changes and trends just mentioned, and the centralising ideology they represent, were described very well by Ernst Jünger (1895-1998). I suggest that Jünger's idea of 'total mobilisation' can be used to describe and criticise the changes in British academic philosophy over the last thirty years?it may apply more widely, but my focus is on the discipline most familiar to me. I begin my briefly introducing Jünger and his political context and then describe 'total mobilisation', before applying it to contemporary British academic philosophy. Since this claim has political as well as philosophical dimensions, the tone is unapologetically critical, especially since a 'totally mobilised' higher education has deleterious effects upon undergraduate teaching and postgraduate training.

Ernst Jünger almost outlived the 20th century. Born in 1895, he served in both world wars, earning military awards and popular acclaim, before settling into a long career as a writer, before his death in 1998 at the age of one hundred and three. Despite his long life and career, my focus is on just two of his works, the long essay Die Totale Mobilmachung ('Total Mobilisation', 1931, TM) and the book Der Arbeiter (The Worker, 1932, W). It is in these works that Jünger here develops his eponymous ideas of 'total mobilisation' and its associated concept of 'the worker', both of which were reactions against the culture and politics of Weimar Germany. Like many of his contemporaries, Jünger was alarmed at what he and other veterans perceived as the impotence and inertia of the liberal democratic values of the new Weimar Republic. Despite such worries, however, Jünger suggested that the war was, as one writer put it, possibly 'the crucible of his generation' which, if properly understood, could draw 'a cultural [and] political victory from the ashes of military disaster'. For many commentators of the period, Germany's defeat in the first world was not simply a military conflict but a symptom of a deeper cultural instability, in which 'the exhaustion of the old values [was] being united with an unconscious longing for a new life' (TM 138). Jünger's philosophical project, then, was to reinterpret the war as a powerful agent of cultural change, and to help articulate and realise this potential. This is what led him to the idea of 'total mobilisation'.

The First World War was not called 'the Great War' simply on account of its geographical and military scope, nor its calamitous human cost. It was also an enormous industrial and technological triumph, in which whole nations maximised and coordinated their massive material and engineering resources: armies of men drafted, tanks rolling off production lines, unsleeping shipyards building battleships, women making shells and uniforms. The entirety of the natural, economic, and human resources of the combatant nations were 'mobilised' and all the energies and determination of an entire nation directed towards a single goal. Jünger praised this mobilisation but argued that it could only fully achieve its potential when it became 'total'. 'Total mobilisation' would therefore see the complete natural and human resources of the state restructured and directed towards a singular set of goals defined by the state. Jünger perceived 'mobilisation' as an historical or 'metaphysical' destiny, one in which the image of war as armed combat merges into the more extended image of a gigantic labour process [Arbeitsprozesse], an 'unlimited marshalling of potential energies' which promised to 'transform' whole nations into 'volcanic forces', resulting in 'the dawn of the age of labour [Arbeitszeitalter]' (TM 126).

Despite the vigorous prose, there is a clear political agenda within Jünger's idea of 'total mobilisation'. A 'totally mobilised' state is one in which the process of 'marshalling potential energies' is extended into and throughout the public sphere, into commerce, politics, art, education, and culture. A'totally mobilised' state marks its 'stamp' onto each individual and every department of human life, resulting in 'the increasing curtailment of ?individual liberty?' with the final aim of 'deny[ing] the existence of anything that is not a function of the state' (TM 127). Instances of total
mobilisation would include the definition of education as the training of future workforces, of artworks and cultural heritage as national assets, and of the environment in terms of natural resources ready and available for human manipulation. Total mobilisation requires that all activities and all individuals become subsumed to the national interest?hence its totalitarian overtones?and become 'efficient' components of a centralised engine of production. The ultimate aim is that 'each individual life becomes, ever more unambiguously, the life of a worker' (TM 128). The 'worker' that Jünger has in mind isn't the burly labourer in grimy overalls, but an efficient functionary, a trained and mechanised component of a wider social machine. The process of 'total mobilisation' and the life of a 'worker' is, moreover, relentless and irresistible, since once one is totally mobilised, 'the possibility of an alternative is not present to [our] consciousness' (TM 134), and any movement away from it is accompanied by the sensation of inefficiency, inactivity, and the painful abandonment of one's role. Jünger wrote, in characteristically charged prose, of 'uniformly moulded masses' who 'comprise a great and fearful spectacle', each caught in the 'merciless grasp' of total mobilisation (TM 138).

The vision of 'total mobilisation' should surely strike us as disturbing and totalitarian and it is not difficult to see why Jünger was popular amongst the emerging National Socialist elites of the mid-1930s. I would now like to consider 'total mobilisation' and relate it to contemporary academic philosophy, and to take three specific points from Jünger's account of 'total mobilisation' and 'the worker': there are 'production', 'specialisation', and 'centralisation'. These can be characterised together. In a 'totally mobilised' system, all energies and activities are geared toward a single end, and that is production?whether of tanks and rifles, saleable goods and commodities, or agricultural products. The large-scale systems needed to attain this production?round-the-clock factories, infrastructure, assembly lines?are staffed and operated by a specialised workforce. Everyone has some special role to play in the system of production, and this role determines their function and value, and of course limits their freedoms to change and develop. Finally, the construction and operation of this enormous system of production requires centralisation, the unitary coordination of these energies and activities. A successfully totally mobilised system consists of specialised units within a rigidly disciplined centralised system of production. This is, indeed, the vision that Jünger describes in his descriptions of 'our daily life, with its inexorability and merciless discipline, its smoking glowing districts, its commerce, its motors, airplanes, and burgeoning cities. With a pleasure-tinged horror, we sense that here, not a single atom is not in motion?that we are profoundly inscribed in this raging process' (TM 128).

Can Jünger's ideas of 'total mobilisation' and 'the worker' be used to model the deleterious trends which academics identify in contemporary British higher education?and, if so, can it therefore offer novel resources for criticising them? Consider the following points. Recent British governments have tended to assess academic philosophy, and other disciplines, according to a standard of production, namely, 'research output', mainly in the form of publications. The familiar mantra is 'publish or perish' and this has generated a numerological mania which affects the structure and motivations of academics. Those who publish are more likely to be awarded jobs and research awards whilst those who are 'research inactive' do not and, often, disappear from the system?or, at the least, fail to advance professionally and financially within it. In some cases, failure to comply with the imperative to publish results in censure or, in severe cases, to the dissolution of entire departments. In 2009, for instance, a plan was presented to the Senate of the University of Liverpool to shut down their Philosophy Department, on the grounds of their poor RAE performance. This is, as one contributor to the ensuing PHILOS-L listserv debate observed, 'part of a Europe-wide process of standardisation [and] bureaucratisation' which is characteristic of 'a mercantile mindset in which all that matters is short-term profit', in which profit equals prestige. Another commentator added that continuous systematic evaluations like the RAE are modelled on management policies imported from private enterprises, in which 'when a part of it 'underperforms' you simply cut it'. These trends are perfectly intelligible as symptoms of an imposed total mobilisation. The imperative is to engage in quantifiably-measurable 'production' in accordance with the directives of a centralised authority rather than the professional and scholarly standards of the affected discipline. Universities and national governments affected by the Bologna Declaration are organising academic philosophy according to dubious criteria of 'productivity' in a way which prioritises research and consummates the marriage of bibliometrics and the 'publish or perish' imperative. A recent initiative in this direction is the proposed European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH) which was criticised in a joint editorial by over fifty leading journals in the history of science,
technology, and medicine (HSTM). The editors of these journals objected that the quantifying zeal of the ERIH would see research 'being subjected to putatively precise accountancy by arbitrary and unaccountable agencies', which threaten to homogenise journals which are 'heterogeneous and distinct.'9 The editors of these journals asked that they be removed from ERIHs listings.

Collective resistance like this is reassuring, but the total mobilisation of academia may be harder to resist. For one thing, publish-or-perish ensures that financial reward and professional advancement are earned within an agonistic competitive arena, meaning that staff members who resist their 'mobilisation' linger on the lower rungs of the professional ladder. The interlinking of departmental funding with satisfactory production of accepted 'outputs' also introduces tangible financial imperatives, especially in these strained economic times. Other forms of resistance are also conceivable, however. Despite the emphasis placed by universities on the undergraduate 'student experience' ?many universities now have a 'Pro-Vice Chancellor (Student Experience)'?there is little emphasis placed on teaching. Although academics should be both teachers and researchers, 'in practice the publish-or-perish syndrome has rendered teaching a peripheral activity', as is clearly evidenced in the derogatory phrase 'teaching load'.10 The RAE awards no points for good teaching, after all, which cannot (yet) be quantified in the way that publications can (although the end-of-term 'student satisfaction' questionnaires may be the beginning of this, and no doubt plans for the quantification of teaching are being drawn up.)

Jünger, of course, can make sense of this. Only that which can be quantified and measured?as 'work', 'output', or 'productivity'?is to be admitted as a value. Teaching and such traditional philosophical values as 'wisdom' cannot be quantified, and so are rejected: funding applications ask for the intended tangible results of new projects, such as workshops or a monograph, and not for obscure, airy things as 'greater understanding' or 'insight'. These are venerable scholarly values yet their resistance to easy quantification precludes them from consideration in an assessment regime which admits only tangible outputs. Indeed, Jünger had emphasised that during total mobilisation what is 'essential' is the 'quality of fighting'?that is, the vigour and industry of activity?rather than any intrinsic reasons or motivations for engaging in such activities (W 76). All that matters is 'the growing conversion of life into energy' (TM 126). In academic terms, this equates to a steady output of journal papers, book chapters, and learned monographs within top-rated journals. The ongoing efforts to rank and rate journals and to measure citation rates are indications of such efforts to measure 'productivity'.

Another form of 'outputs' will of course be economic products. Philosophy is generally rather distant from economic profitability and so like most arts and humanities departments would suffer from any increasing emphasis on any emphasis on economic outputs. Sadly this is just what is being urged both by businesses and by the British government. A2009 report by the Confederation of British Industry argued that British university education should focus on subjects such as science, technology, mathematics and languages?namely those with economic value?a claim regretfully echoed by the then-British education secretary David Lammey.11 HEFCE's recent report on the REF compounds the problem, emphasising the need to attract research funding from businesses, creating new business, better-informed policy-making, and 'cultural enrichment'.12 Most of this is obviously geared towards quantifiable economic productivity and statistical demonstration?and before that mention of 'cultural enrichment' inspires any optimism one should bear in mind its accompanying caveat that it should include 'improved public engagement with science and research'. HEFCE clarifies that cultural enrichment amounts to increased public engagement with and attitudes towards science and technology, namely to propagandising on behalf of science and technology that borders on ideological technocracy. And if that judgment seems too extreme, the report includes the explicit statement that the definition of 'impact' does not 'intend to include impact through intellectual influence on scientific knowledge and academia'.13

The emphasis upon relentless publication is allied to specialisation. Academic departments now place growing emphasis upon postgraduate recruitment. MA and PhD students pass through an increasingly harried training and research process in what the band Franz Ferdinand aptly described as the 'academic factory' in which they are loaded with 'key skills' and located within a niche of specialised learning for them to mine. The growing popularity of 'module streams' through undergraduate syllabi?from 'Ethics and Values' to 'Moral Theory' and then to third year 'A
Applied Ethics' for instance?is one manifestation of this. Such module streams may allow students with defined interests to move deeper into their areas of particular interest but it may also serve to discourage a broad and comprehensive exploration of philosophy. Many historians of philosophy complain that contemporary undergraduate philosophy courses fail to provide students with a sufficiently comprehensive grounding in the history and diversity of philosophy. However the spirit of 'total mobilisation' seeks to produce highly specialised postgraduate researchers?cognitive Swiss army knives, able to perform highly technical studies of narrow subjects and areas?rather than those 'eclectics' whose historical and disciplinary scope is much broader.14

A typical response to such appeals for eclecticism is the fact that the sheer number of working academics demands that one be specialised. The current rate of publication ensures that new journal papers and monographs appear at a constant rate on almost every topic?mental ontology, virtue ethics, Kantian aesthetics, philosophy of action, and more. Without a well-defined 'niche', one will be crowded out amongst the throng of others, especially at a time when, according to Randall Collins, 'several hundred thousand publications appear every year in the humanities and social sciences' such that 'it may well feel as if we are drowning in a sea of texts'.15 Jünger might praise the philosopher who publishes to avoid perishing, and who 'endlessly brings forth magnificent and merciless spectacles' (W, 77), but he might seem an alien figure to the rest of us. After all, some philosophers were prolific writers?Aristotle and Russell, say?whilst others?like Socrates and Wittgenstein?barely published a thing, a point developed by Donald Gillies' critical essay How Should Research Be Organised?, which argues that the RAE, both in its previous and future forms, is costly and unlikely to increase the quality of research.16

Jünger?like the RAE, ERIH, and the politicians and administrators?judges the quality of research in quantifiable terms, where by value equates to output, to mass and numbers. Moreover, as the historian of science Steven Shapin recently warned, specialisation can easily mutate into 'hyperprofessionalisation', the insular disciplinary myopia that praises abstruse submergence in technicalities. Too often, complains Shapin, 'doing philosophy' equates to 'dexterity in manipulating the disciplinary literature', rather than actually addressing the issues.17 It lacks, as he says, an 'aboutness' which contributes to the alleged 'irrelevance' or 'disconnection' of philosophy?a point ironically repeated by political critics of the arts and humanities who insist that academic research should be directed towards the sciences.

Jünger's final theme was centralisation. He argued that total mobilisation must be directed by a centralised power because nothing less could survey and unify the disparate energies of the state. Without a central power which 'invades' spheres of activity and 'demanded their role in the bloody engagement', vast amounts of energy?industrial, intellectual, and so on?would remain 'immobilised' (TM 134).

This might be true of national industrial and economic resources, even if environmentalists and anti-capitalists might object. However, it is arguably not true of academic philosophers, whose vocational commitment to their subjects should, hopefully, be enough to encourage them to research. Wittgenstein, after all, wrote just two philosophical books in his life, and only wrote the second after long meditation on the first. Others churn out papers at a rapid rate. But, either way, introducing extraneous pressures on philosophers to publish will hardly encourage quality research; especially postgraduates, for whom the mention of 'publications' is inevitably accompanied by a fearful shudder.

Either way, anyone 'called' to do philosophy should follow Rainer Maria Rilke's advice in the first of his Letters to a Young Poet, that if 'you are indeed called to be a writer. Then accept that fate ... without asking for the reward which might come from without'.18

Centralisation poses a further danger to academic philosophy. Whilst the RAE/REF and research in general is not controlled by the government it does contribute to a creeping control, albeit subtle, of academic research. Despite disclaimers, the RAE/REF does tend to favour certain 'top' journals over others, and this tends to promote certain kinds of philosophy over others; for instance, 'core' areas in metaphysics or epistemology, of the kind familiar to readers of Analysis or Mind, enjoy higher bibliometric status than, say, Environmental Values or the Journal of Indian Philosophy. This might have the effect of invisibly promoting certain areas of philosophy at the expense of others by introducing a powerful coercive constraint on the kinds and types of philosophy which will accrue RAE points. The result could be loss of intellectual diversity?perhaps environmental and Asian philosophy will continue to live in the shadows of metaphysics and philosophical logic, to the detriment of both the historical and intellectual richness of
philosophical research and undergraduate syllabi. Moreover, large funding bodies like the AHRC have already begun to introduce multimillion pound 'strategic programmes'?like 'Beyond Text', which enjoys £5.5 million funding and will run over five years, having commenced in 2007. Critics already have that such 'research programmes' merely reflect the AHRCs' focus on 'trendy' but vacuous research projects at the expense of funding traditional research.19 One fears that this sort of centralised direction of academic research activities, in philosophy and beyond, will be amplified by the next RAE, the 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF)?especially when one reads HEFCEs ambition to 'work to a more unified framework across all subjects' by, for instance, achieving 'consistency' by reducing the number of subject panels.20 Whether or not this indicates the academic homogenisation which it threatens is something that only time will tell; however, it does seem to indicate another movement towards the 'centralisation' that total mobilisation increasingly demands.

There is a final point raised by Jünger that should be addressed, which pertains to postgraduate teaching and research. Jünger once remarked that the 'spirit of mobilisation can dominate an individual's capacities, yet fail to penetrate his essence.' By this he meant that one can become a productive component of a centralised system?a 'worker' participating in 'total mobilisation'?without having a 'deeper' commitment to 'readiness for mobilisation' (TM 136, 129). This 'inauthentic' worker produces and participates in total mobilisation but has not experienced a psychological transformation?at the least, such a person will find themselves cooperating with policies and values which they neither agree with nor could tolerate indefinitely. Such 'inauthenticity' is arguably an increasingly familiar experience for many academics, but especially for postgraduates and early career researchers who find their own ambitions and aspirations increasingly in tension with the externally imposed targets and objectives introduced by the policies and structures of British higher education. Although most postgraduates are keen to publish and research and engage in the full range of intellectual and professional activities which constitute academic life, they would arguably fulfill them better without the looming presence of 'total mobilisation'. For Jünger, such objections to 'total mobilisation' simply indicate a weakness and passivity which automatically debar such persons from participation; however, his response is premised upon a set of martial virtues such as 'determination', 'discipline', and 'stamina' which are, even upon fairly liberal conceptions, hardly consonant with the professional virtues of academics. Certainly the virtues which one needs to endure and succeed in 'total mobilisation' are not conducive to the teaching and research activities of academia?in which the free and open development and exchange of ideas and the nurturing of the intellectual characters of students are surely the primary objectives.

Certainly the industriousness and determination which Jünger celebrates may be gratifying, such that one can indeed delight in the 'release of new forms of power' and the experience of 'unified and profound ... capacity' of total mobilisation 'to summon, from the outset, all possible forces for its cause' (TM 127, 134). However, the individuals who can create and thrive under such conditions and with such a psychology are unlikely to be attractive figures in an academic context. Jünger describes his 'worker' as 'steely, chiselled', marked by a 'hardness' borne of constant struggle and challenge?just as he was, during his experiences in the trenches of the First World War. Such a figure is, however, very far from the character of the philosopher described by the ancient Greeks or the scholar of the early modern period: they lack the temperance, patience, reflectiveness, and intellectual generosity which are preconditional for success in both academic teaching and research. The 'worker-philosopher' whom Jünger describes, who 'publishes or perishes' and is 'totally mobilised', is a remote figure from the equanimity of the Stoic sage, say, or the thoughtfully reflective early modern scholar. If philosophy is best understood, as Pierre Hadot puts it, as 'a way of life', then the sort of philosopher produced by the 'total mobilising' spirit of contemporary academic philosophy is surely a very unattractive one.21 And even if one does not subscribe to Hadot's vision of la vie philosophique, the 'totally mobilised' philosopher is surely still an unattractive figure?preoccupied with carving out and mining narrow specialised niches, motivated by 'outputs' and 'productivity', and dominated by a grossly instrumental conception of his own activities and that of his discipline. The foregoing remarks have been generally critical in nature. I suggested that contemporary British higher education, at least in the specific case of academic philosophy, can be successfully modelled using Jünger's ideas of 'total mobilisation' and 'the worker'. Many recent trends in British academic philosophy do seem to reflect the 'totally mobilised' preoccupations with 'productivity' and 'specialisation' and the third theme of 'centralisation' is becoming increasingly visible on the horizon?although this depends upon future de
velopments in higher education policy. Prime amongst my concerns is the point that a totally-mobilised academy will tend to produce scholars who fail to manifest the scholarly virtues which are most suited for academic life?certainly this is visible in the experiences of many current postgraduates and early career researchers. After all, when Jünger described 'states transform[ing] themselves into gigantic factories, producing armies on the assembly line' (TM 129), it is not too fanciful to imagine similar remarks being made about 'productive' philosophy departments, transforming themselves into 'academic factories' mass-producing research, 'outputs', and postgraduates on an academic conveyor belt, and in which the practice of philosophy becomes indistinguishable from the manufacture of motor engines. Of course there will always be a tension between vocational idealism and practical realism, but surely a better compromise than 'total mobilisation' can be found.

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Endnotes

- Herf, op. cit, 73, 76.
- HEFCE (2009a), 51c.
- For a further discussion, see my ‘Specialisation, Postgraduate Research, and Philosophical Eclecticism’, *Discourse*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2008) pp. 239-245. For the historical complaint, see Cooper, David E., 'Philosophy and its Past', *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 3 (1996).


• For a sample of critics, see Leiter, Brian, 'A Huge Cut in Funding for Philosophy in the UK?', [http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2008/02/a-huge-cut-inp.html](http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2008/02/a-huge-cut-inp.html); Blackburn, Simon, 'A Takeaway Delivery', [http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=400428&c=1](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=400428&c=1); Crace, John, 'Arts cuts 'will be devastating'', [http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/research/story/0,,2257830,00.html](http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/research/story/0,,2257830,00.html).


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