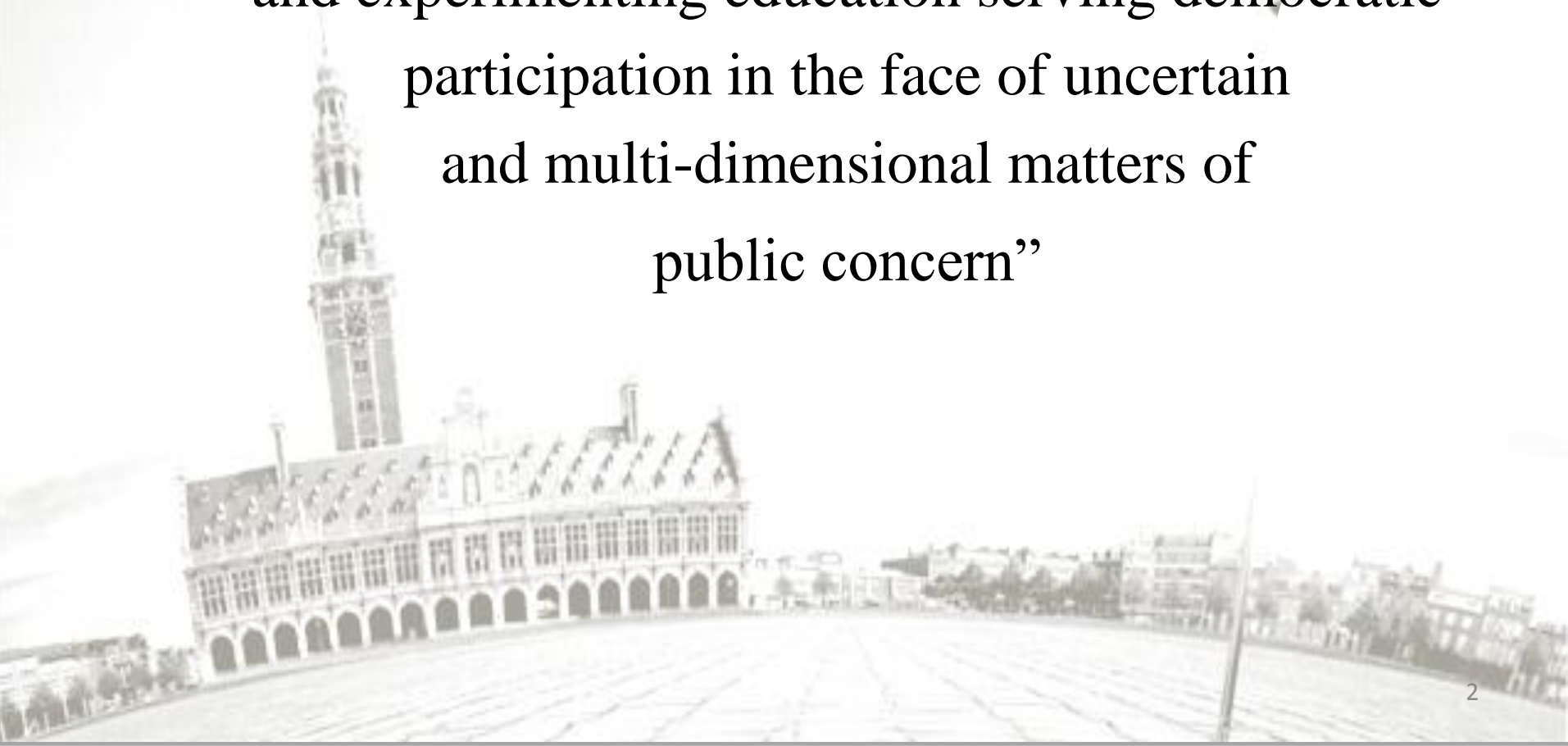# Authoritative Knowledge

& the Public Role of the University

(How complexity challenges our assumptions and opens alternate possibilities)

Dr Deborah Osberg
Graduate School of Education
University of Exeter

". . .on how the emergentist logic underlying complexity theory calls forth inventionalistic and experimenting education serving democratic participation in the face of uncertain and multi-dimensional matters of public concern"

Authoritative knowledge

defines what is worth striving for

and the university has a part
to play in this
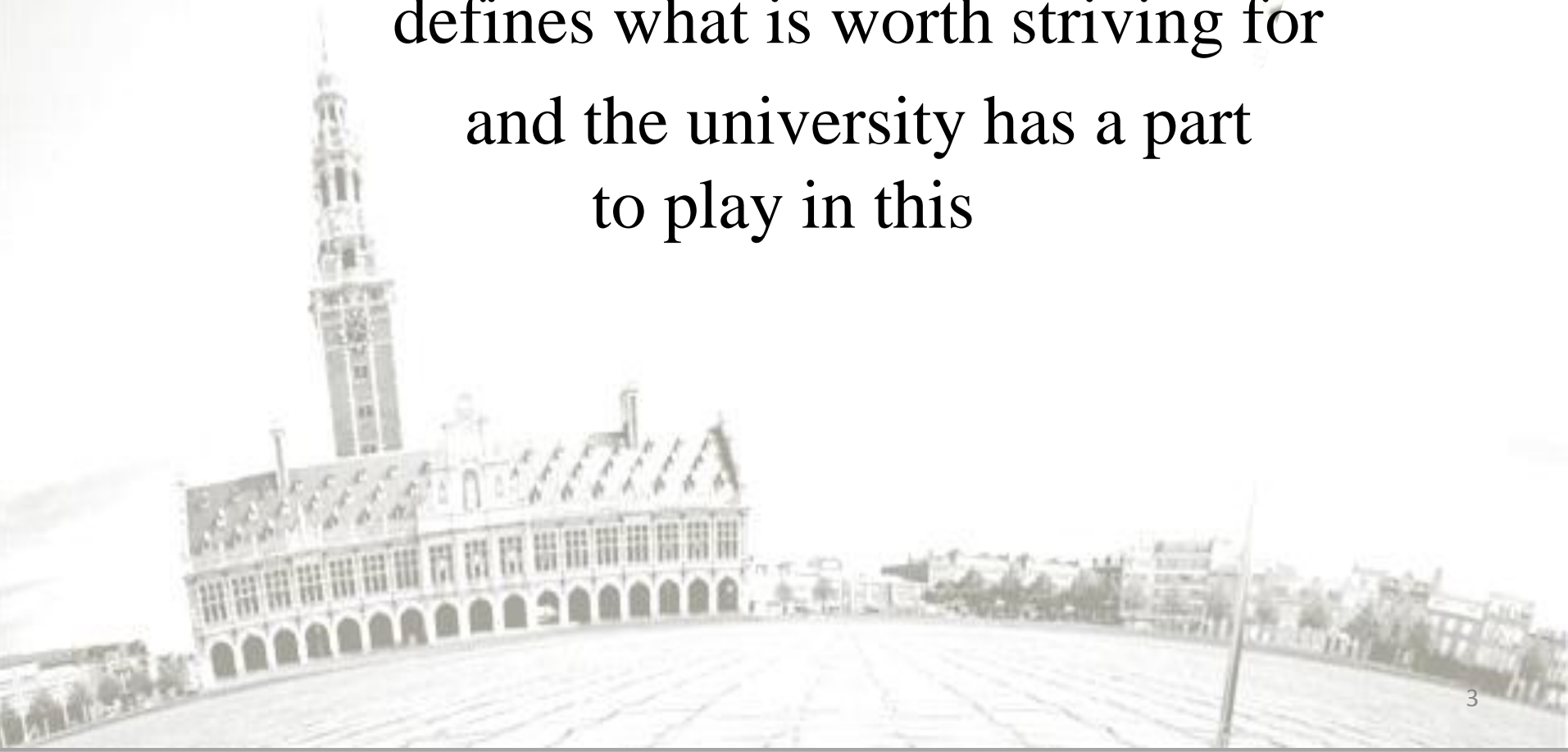
a PUBLIC good

In defining **what** is worth struggling for, the University has, since the1700's, been seen as an important "guiding light" for society

Critical questioning of the authority of the "everyday world" is what gave it the authority to lead in defining ***what*** was worth struggling for
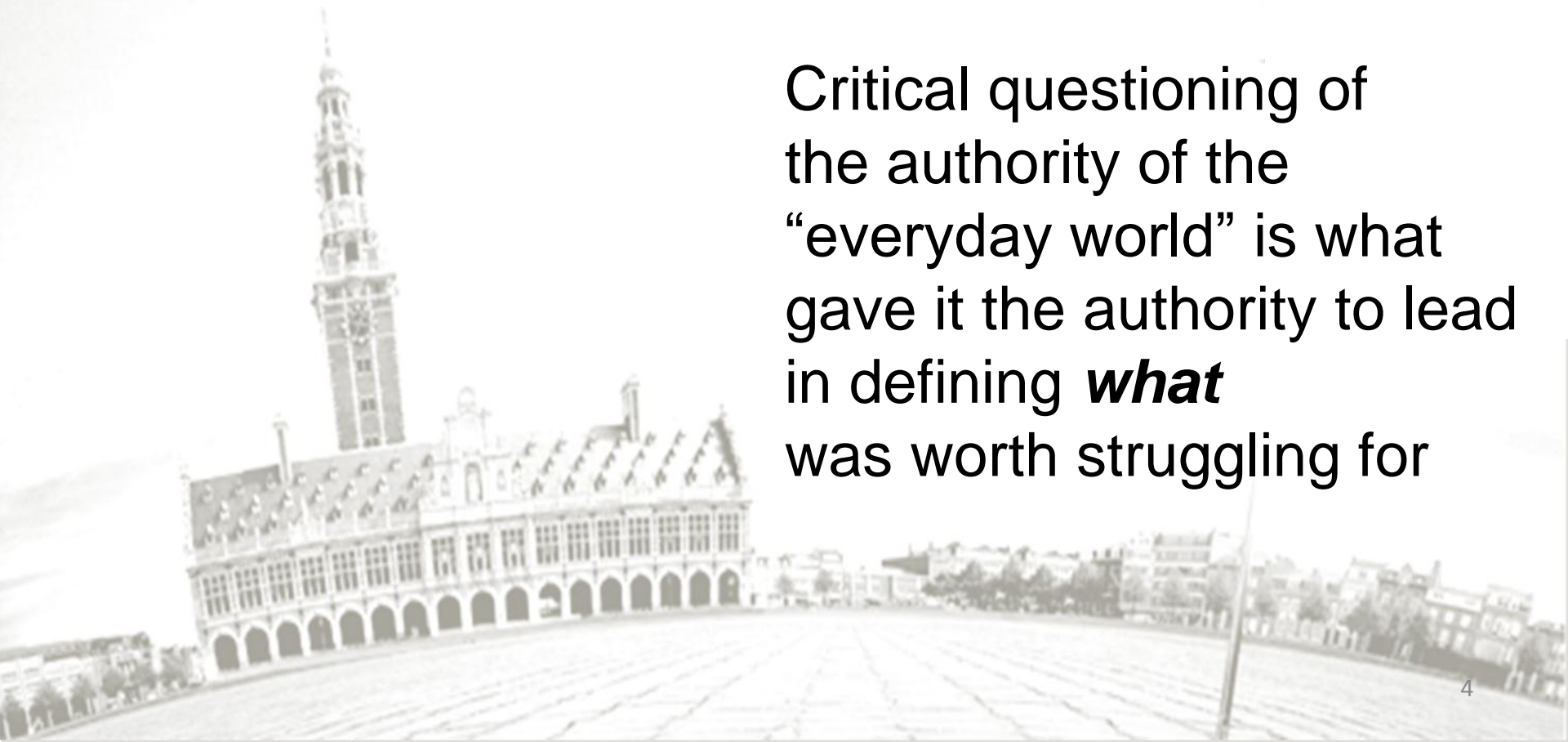
Globalisation and postmodernisation have exposed the colonising impetus of Western claims to authority through "critical reason" (Usher & Edwards, 1994)

Shifts in the production and legitimation of knowledge (Gibbons et al, 1994, Lyotard, 1984) have blurred the boundaries between the university and the rest of society (Webster, 2009).

for example

- The university no longer the only/main source of knowledge production (Edgerton 1996)

- 'Encyclopediac' forms of knowledge challenged by 'performative' knowledge (Gibbons et al, 1994).

- Many forms of HE now called 'universities' putting an end to the common purposes of the university (Bridges, 2000).

- Criteria for validating knowledge claims widening as knowledge becomes more of a commodity (Gewertz, 2000).

Simons, Haverhals & Biesta

*The University Revisited (*2007, p. 400, in *Studies in Philosophy & Education*)

[The university is] no longer regarded as an institution that offers an orientation for society; rather . . . it is society and its needs that . . . orient the university.

Simons, Haverhals & Biesta

*The University Revisited (*2007, p. 400, in *Studies in Philosophy & Education*)

"it is **not only** . . . that universities have thoroughly changed when compared to their 'traditional' predecessors. **Also**, the conditions under which they are supposed to . . . fulfill their traditional "public role" appear to be very different than how they were in the past . . ." (p. 400).

Ron Barnett

University Knowledge in an Age of Supercomplexity (2000, p. 415)

Supercomplexity: arises under conditions of conceptual overload . . . The outcome of a multiplicity of frameworks . . . Forms of "right knowing" no longer clear . . . Rival forms of knowing claiming legitimacy (the postmodern position . . . the "pluralisation of authority)

Complexity: that state of affairs in which the demands before one exceed the resources to meet them (in principle manageable if only one had the resources to meet them).
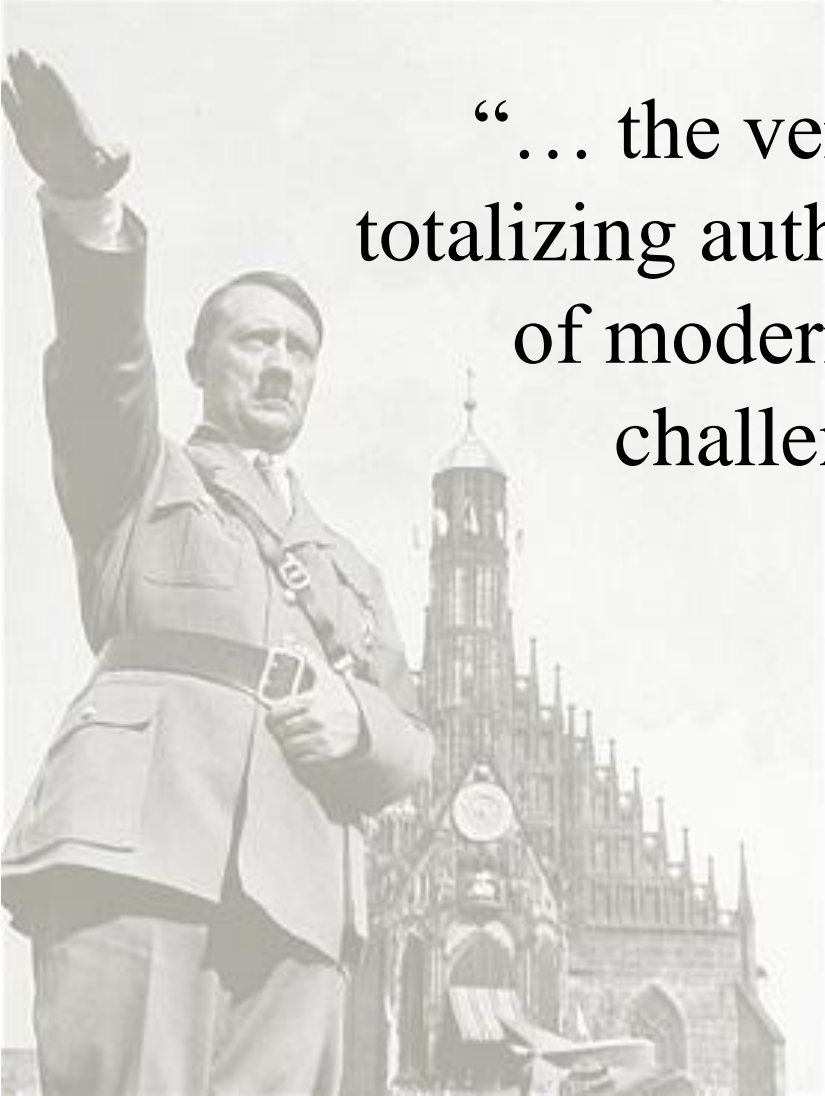
Immanuel Kant

What is Enlightenment? (1784, online)

to be "enlightened" is to have the resolve and courage to question authority

"… to use one's understanding without guidance from another."

Stephen Hopgood

Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred (2009, p. 232)

"… the very idea of the possibility of a totalizing authority is in doubt. This is one of modernity's prime achievements— challenging the authority claims of those who urge us to pile the cadavers even higher.
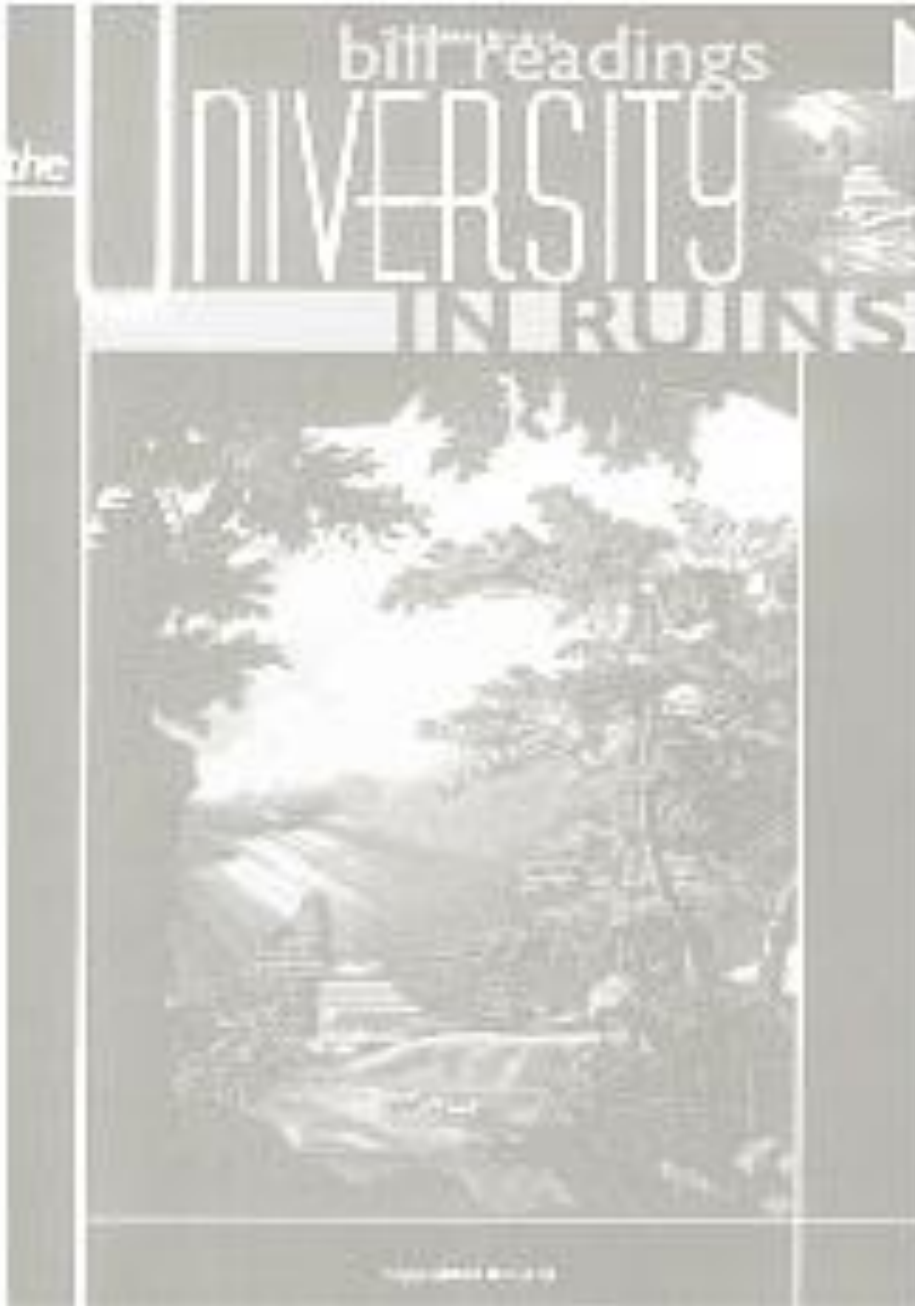
Authority *per se* is now contested. And this contest is permanent."

Hannah Arendt

What is Authority? (1969)

the notion of ***authority*** is "clouded by controversy and confusion"

bill readings
the UNIVERSITY IN RUINS

Frank Webster

Social Sciences at the Crossroads: The Postmodern University (2009, online)

"I have no doubt that universities will continue to survive, but I do fear that maybe they will go on, at least in part, as **zombie institutions** (the living dead) since it is unclear what their distinguishing features will be."

IF the notion of "the university" as the "fount of authoritative knowledge" has been seriously unsettled [by "supercomplexity" etc] . . .

then **what** is its "**new**" public role?

It founders (when framed in this way) because

any (authoritative) attempt to define what the university **should** become — which is effectively to argue against other (authoritative) possibilities/positions — is immediately implicated in a **performative contradiction**

i.e., it is an attempt to solve the problem of the "pluralisation of authority" by putting in place **one** authoritative solution.

Performative contradiction

Objectivist / relativist

Modernist / postmodernist

Foundationalist / antifoundationalist

- Polarised on the basis of **warrants** for authority

Ron Barnett

University Knowledge in an Age of Supercomplexity (2000, p. 415)

Complexity: that state of affairs in which the demands before one exceed the resources to meet them (in principle manageable if only one had the resources to meet them).

EMERGENCE

(more than the sum of its parts)

But we can't make something out of nothing!

"Going On"

A different (emergentist) way of understanding

**change . . . growth . . . progress . . . hierarchy**

Modern/postmodern epistemological positions are polarised on the basis of holding **assumptions** about change, hierarchy, growth & progress (of knowledge) **that are challenged by emergentist logic**.

This has implications for the way we understand "authoritative knowledge" which is underpinned by the notion of hierarchy

Michel Foucault

Nietzsche, Genealogy, History (1984, pp. 76-100).
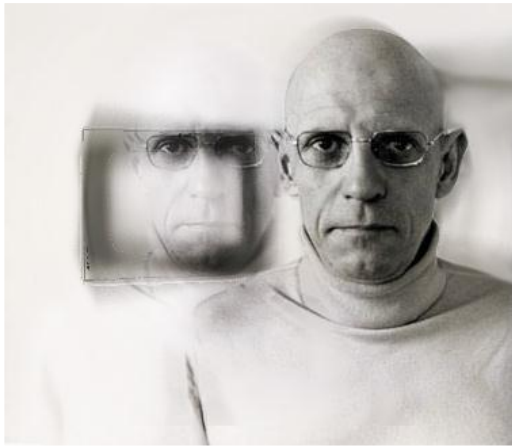
> "Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting."

Little knowledge
(deficit/deficient)

Much knowledge
(authority)

**Cartesian growth of knowledge & understanding
towards an ideal (e.g. truth)**

- **MODERN**: Selection of "winners" through an *objective* and value-neutral process (efficacy).

- **POSTMODERN**: Selection of "winners" an effect of social processes that allow dominant members of society to dictate the terms under which knowledge is created and judged (rules of the contest).

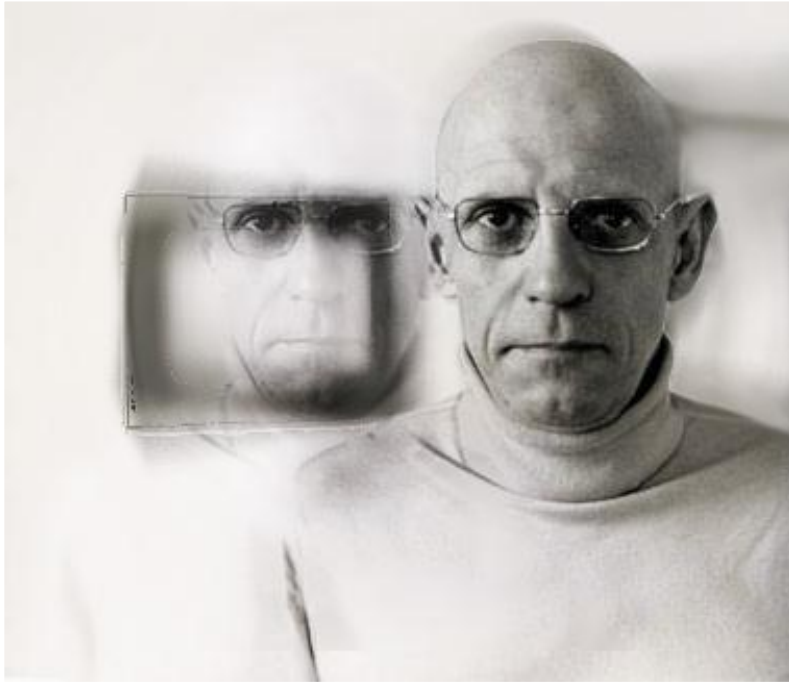Little knowledge
(deficit/deficient)

Much knowledge
(authority)

**Cartesian growth of knowledge & understanding
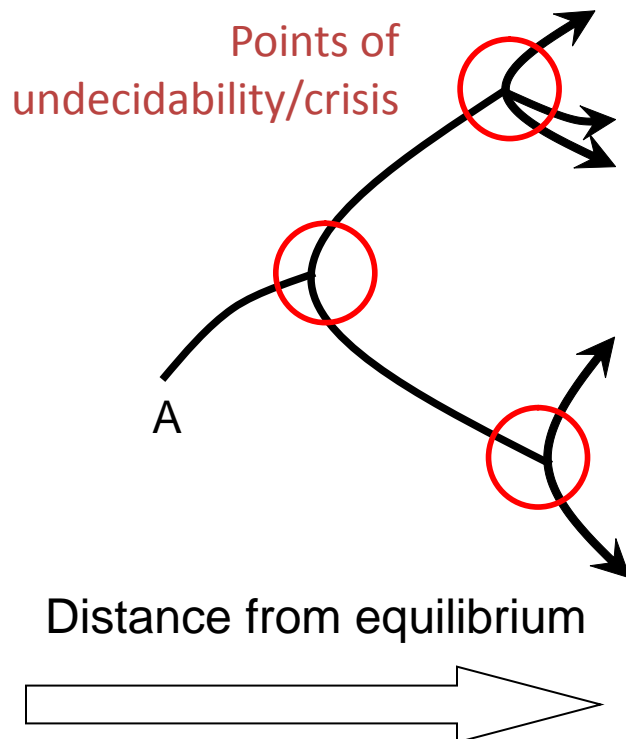towards an ideal (e.g. truth)**

Michel Foucault

Nietzsche, Genealogy, History (1984, pp. 76-100).

"How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the [linear] intensification of power relations?"

Ilya Prigogine

Order out of Chaos (1984, p. 170)

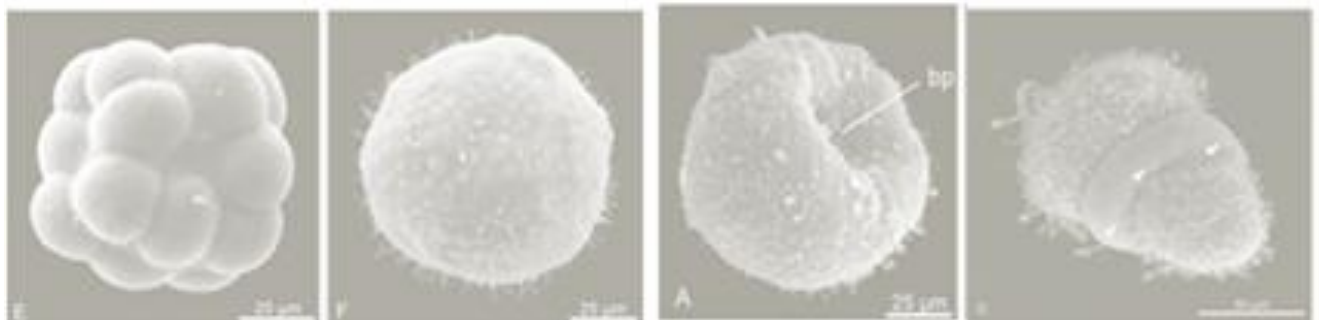At these crisis points the system is forced to do something unprecedented in the history of the system

The system "cuts" into a new level of order.

Points of undecidability/crisis

A

Distance from equilibrium

1) Growth/progress as scalar intensification.

("More of the same")

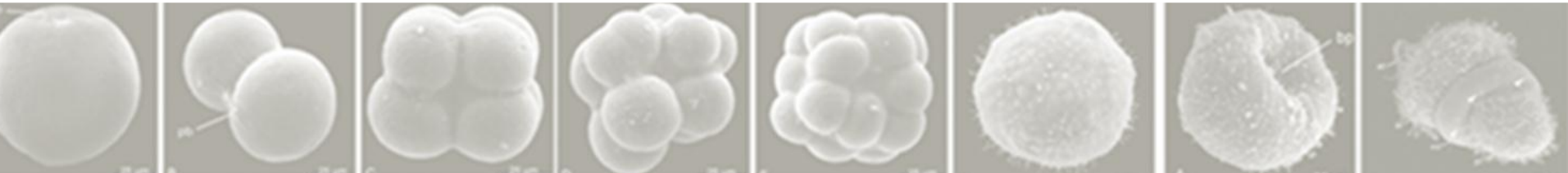2) Growth/progress as unprecedented change.

("Cutting through" to a new level of order)

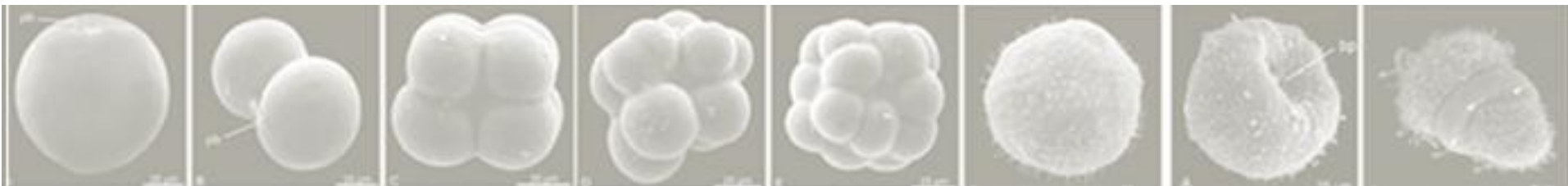# Hannah Arendt

What is Authority? (1969, online, p. 19

"all authority derives from this foundation, binding every act back to the sacred beginning of Roman history, adding, as it were, to every single moment the whole weight of the past."

Hannah Arendt

What is Authority? (1969, online)

- the open-ended *augmentation of the foundation* rather than something that comes about through (competitive) striving for a preconceived goal *positioned in the future*.

- *Auctoritas*, the property of being able to confer (legal) validity on an act,

- *Auctor,* the one who is able to confer this validity,

- *Augere,* to augment, increase, enrich or add.

Hannah Arendt

What is Authority? (1969, online)

"what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation" (p. 18).

- The *auctor* is therefore the person who augments, increases, or adds to *the foundation*.

- As the foundation is "augmented" or added to, it becomes different than what it was, it is, in effect a new or enriched (augmented) foundation.
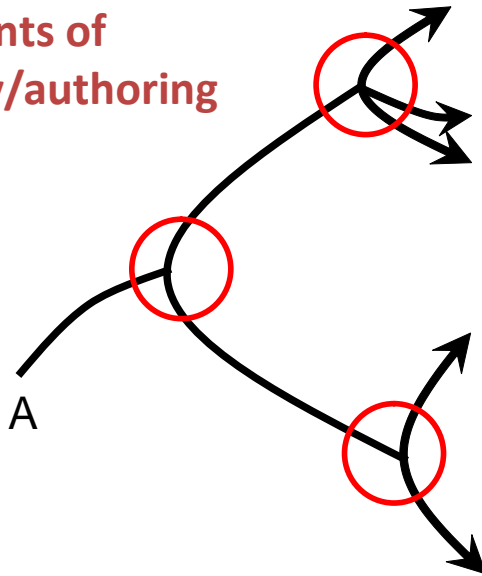
  ***The auctor* is the originator or *author* of this new foundation.**
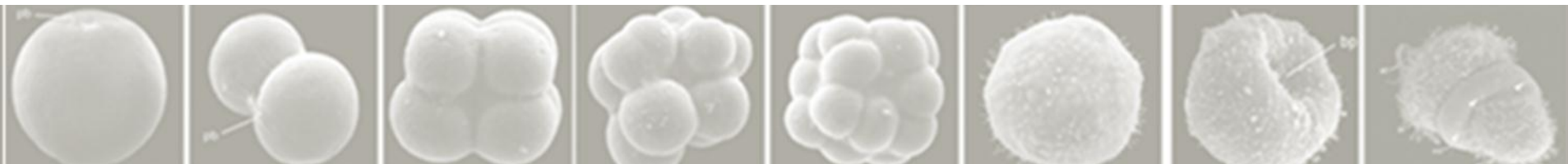
Ilya Prigogine

Order out of Chaos (1984, p. 170)

Points of undecidability/crisis **= points of authority/authoring**

A

Distance from equilibrium
(or "input" from "outside")

At **these crisis points** the system is forced to do something unprecedented in the history of the system

At these points we **find** and **found** a new way forward, we cut into a new level of order…

a new way forward is authored/authorised

What does this have to do with the University?

"Centre of Enlightenment"
& "Guiding Light"
for society

Thank you!