

Universities

Spaces of epistemic living,
frustration, and hope

Kyriaki Papageorgiou

Theories of Science, KULT

April 21, 2026

Why universities?

“

From modest beginnings over nine hundred years ago, [the university] has become the quiet but decisive catalyst in modern society, the factor essential to its effective functioning and well-being.

– Frank Rhodes, 2001: xi

The future of universities

They made the modern world. Now they must survive it.

A Nature special

24 September 2025

Briefing | Besieging the ivory tower

Donald Trump is battling America's elite universities—and winning

The Ivy League sees little point in fighting the federal government in court

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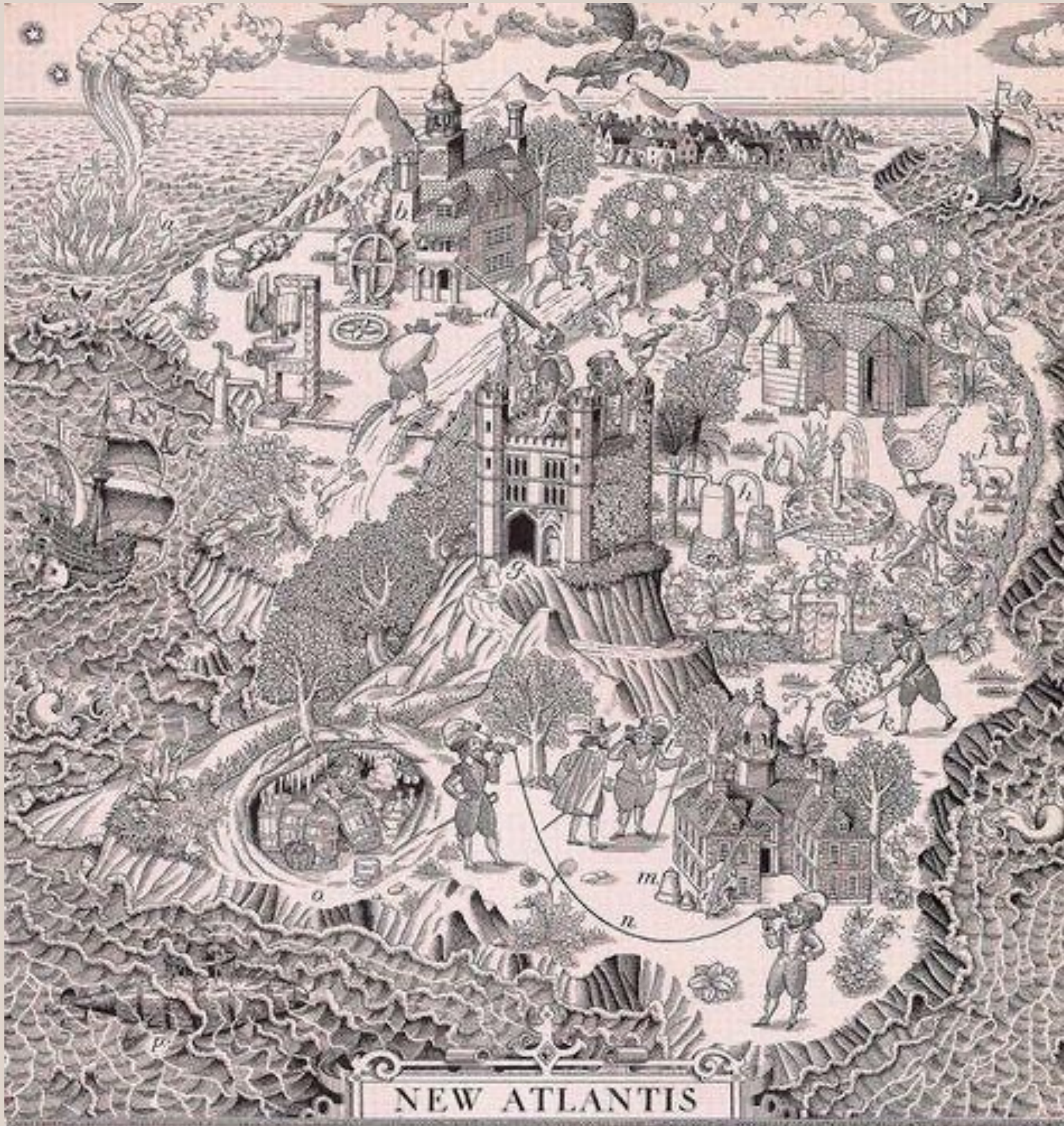


<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/04/10/donald-trump-is-battling-americas-elite-universities-and-winning>

Why universities? Why now?

An invitation to think critically about the institution you are working in. Not as outsiders, but as people who are already inside it, already shaped by it, and who have some say in what it becomes.



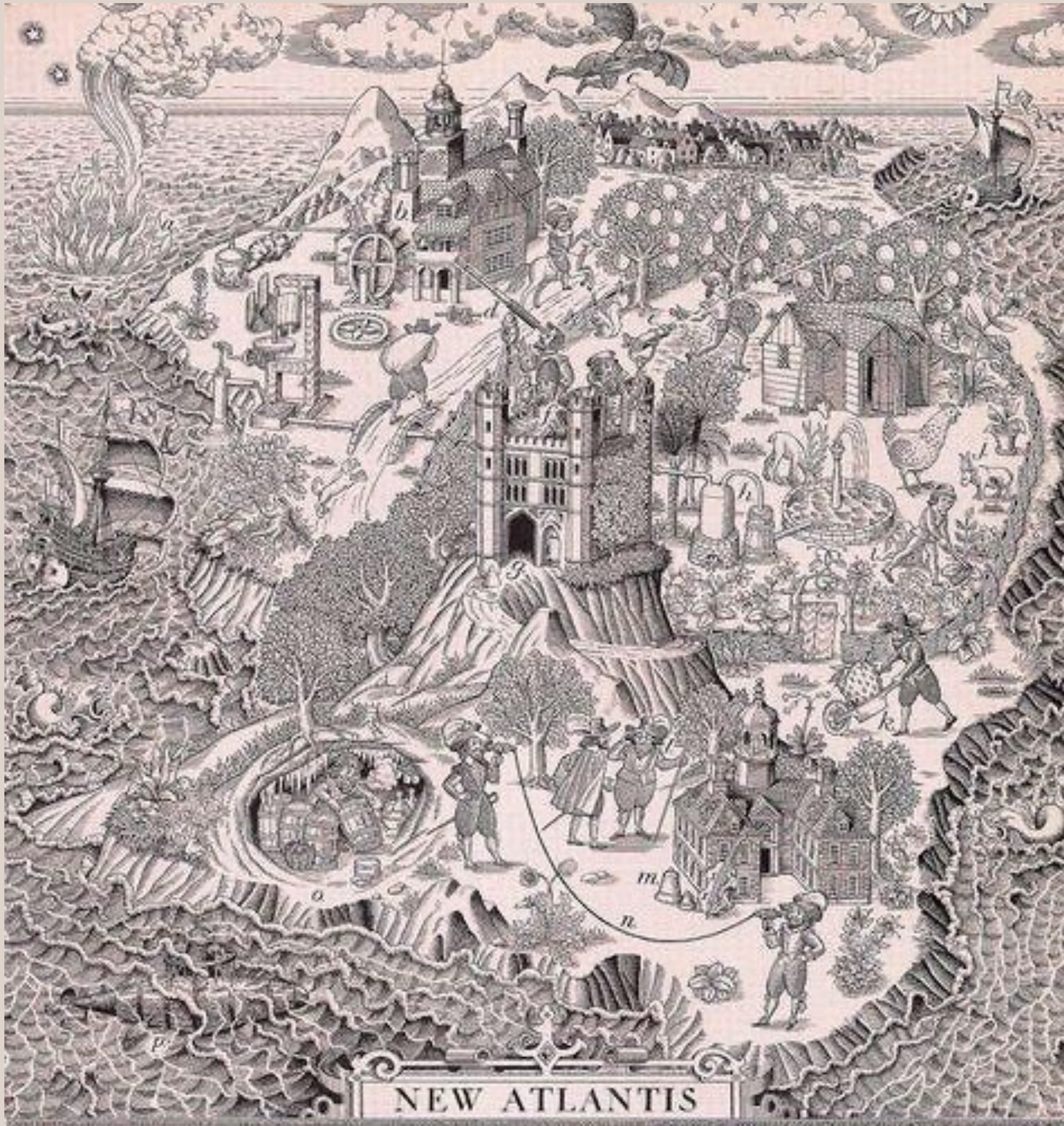


Atlantis

HOPES AND FUTURES OF ACADEMIA

Reimagining Bacon's New Atlantis





It represents a **revolutionary reimagining of knowledge-making infrastructures** that challenged the dogmatism often associated with the Church's control of learning in his time/monopoly over truth.

A fictional **precursor to the modern research university**: the scientific, state-supported, and institutionally organized university that emerged in Europe during the Enlightenment and beyond.

When you imagine a university where you could do your best work, where you felt free, supported, and genuinely engaged, what does it look like?

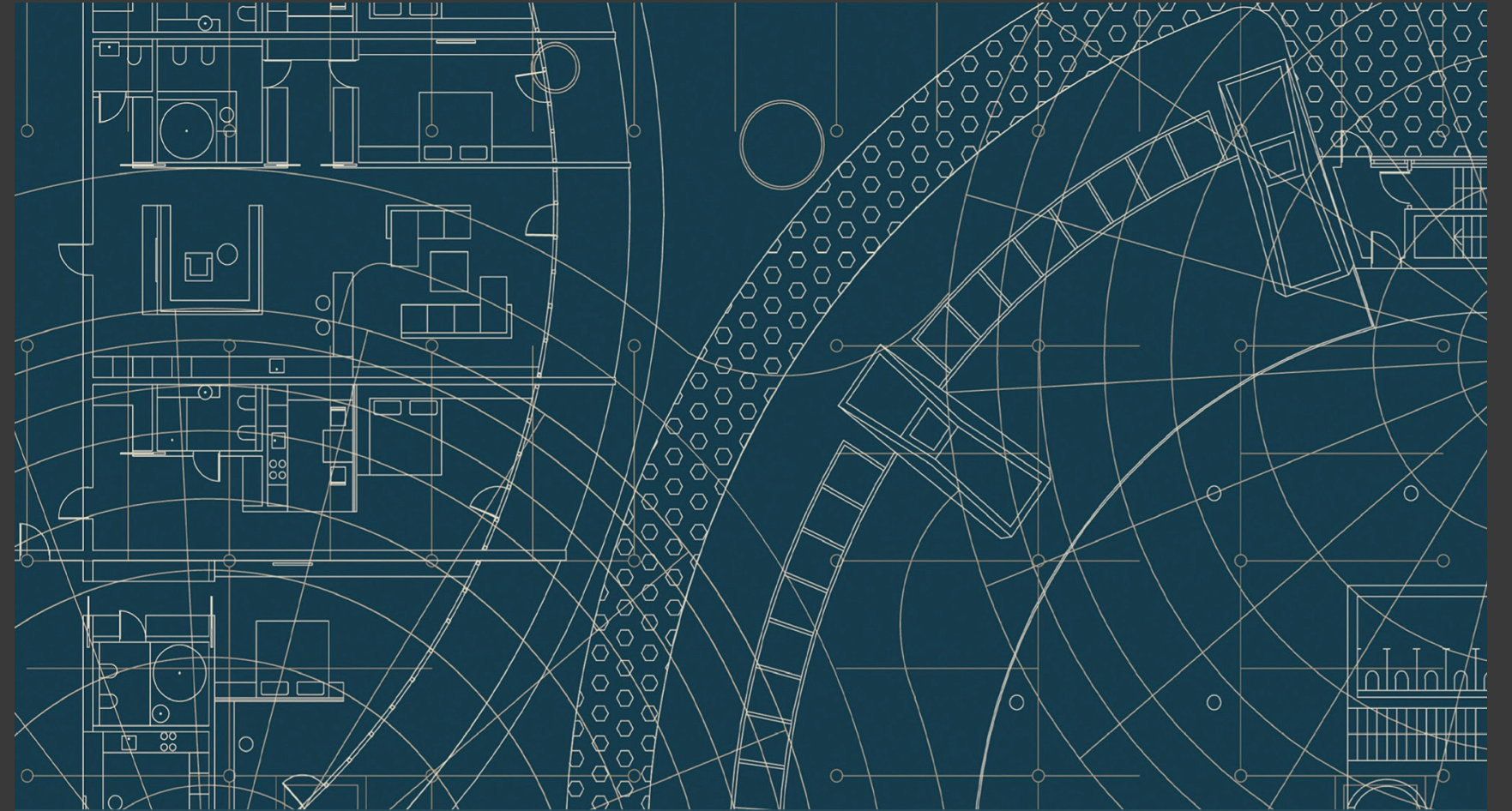


Now write one word that
describes how you actually feel
about your university



Chapter 3

In the Shadows of Excellence and Neoliberal Interventions



Routledge Studies in Science, Technology and Society

QUESTING EXCELLENCE IN ACADEMIA

A TALE OF TWO UNIVERSITIES

Knut H. Sørensen and Sharon Traweek



01

**Academic capitalism
& epistemic politics**

Battles over expertise,
disciplinary boundaries,
prestige & resources

02

**Managerialism &
bureaucratization**

Governance by metrics, KPIs,
rankings, branding...

03

Academic freedom

Legally protected, but
internally policed

04

**Meritocracy & its
double blind**

Academics believe in it and
doubt it

05

Precurity

Living and working with
ongoing insecurity

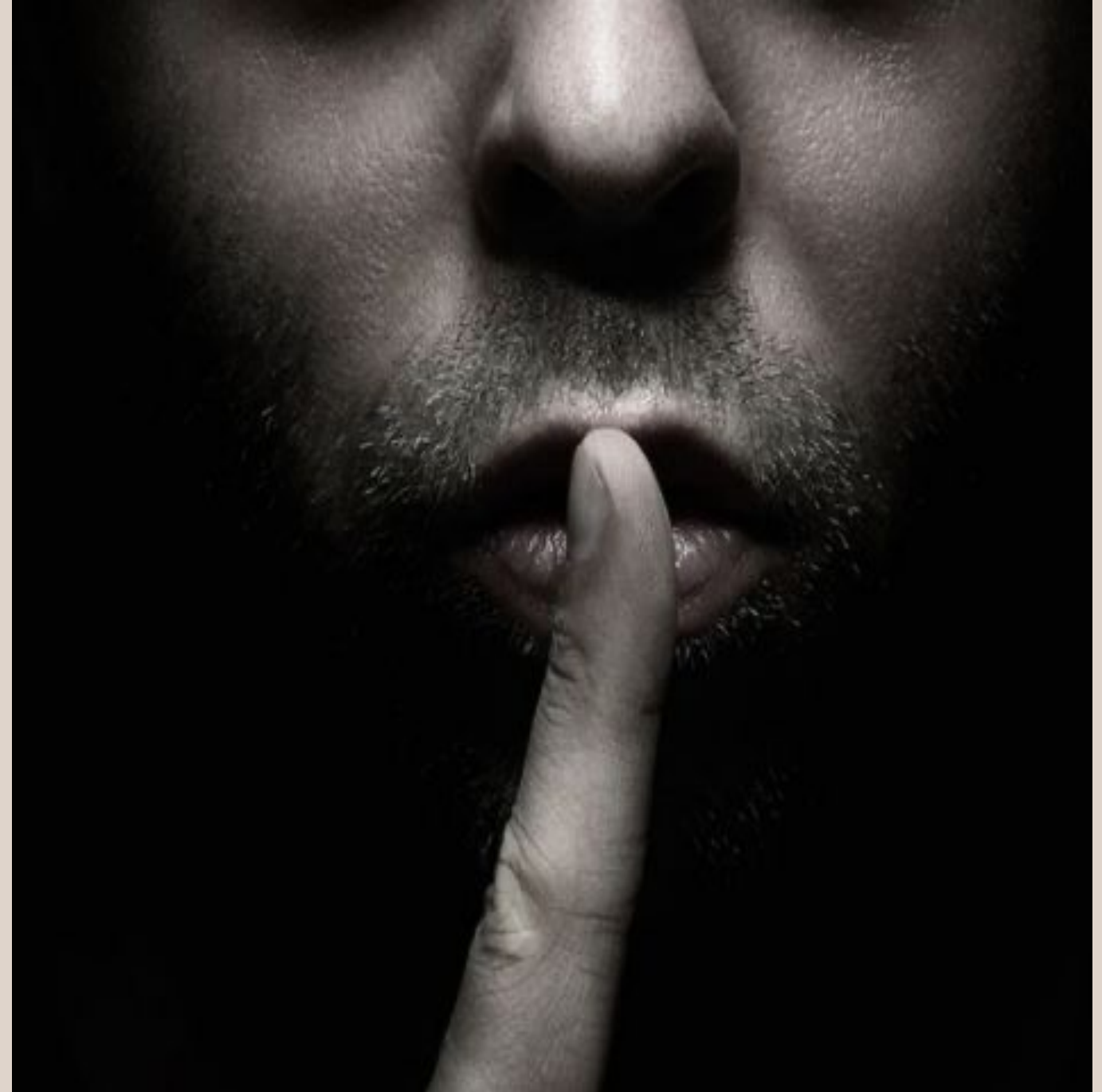
06

**Factions &
“pawa hara”**

Internal power relations,
hierarchies & loyalties



“ ... most academics consider public articulation of critical opinions about university development as useless. The situation is like what Herbert Marcuse (1964) characterized as **repressive tolerance**.



– Sørensen & Traweek, 2022: 99



Epistemic living spaces...

“

...researchers' individual or collective perceptions and narrative re-constructions of the structures, contexts, rationales, actors and values which mold, guide and delimit their potential actions, both in what they aim to know as well as in how they act in social contexts in science and beyond.

– Ulrike Felt

The Critic

What are universities for?

—
James Orr



“

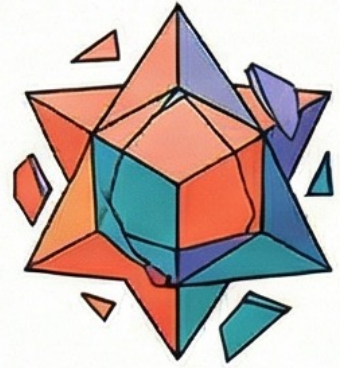
We're trying to be a national lab, a democracy school, a global brand, and a planetary ethics center. No organization can do all that.

— Senior academic,
ATLANTIS project interview

“Reassembling the University”

To visualize the four conflicting “moral-epistemic” configurations—combinations of moral values and knowledge assumptions—that drive the modern university’s sense of “ontological crisis.”

The modern university is not a fixed entity but a site of “continuous assembly.” The sense of crisis in higher education is not merely financial or organizational; it is “ontological,” caused by the collision of four incompatible visions of what a university is for.



THE UNIVERSITY AS A “CONTESTED ASSEMBLY”

Coherence is an achievement of constant maintenance among conflicting moral and epistemic commitments.

THE FOUR COMPETING VISIONS



TECHNOCRATIC

Core Moral Commitment:
Progress and mastery of nature

Imagined Purpose:
An engine of discovery, innovation, and global competitiveness.



HUMANISTIC

Core Moral Commitment:
Ethical formation and civic duty

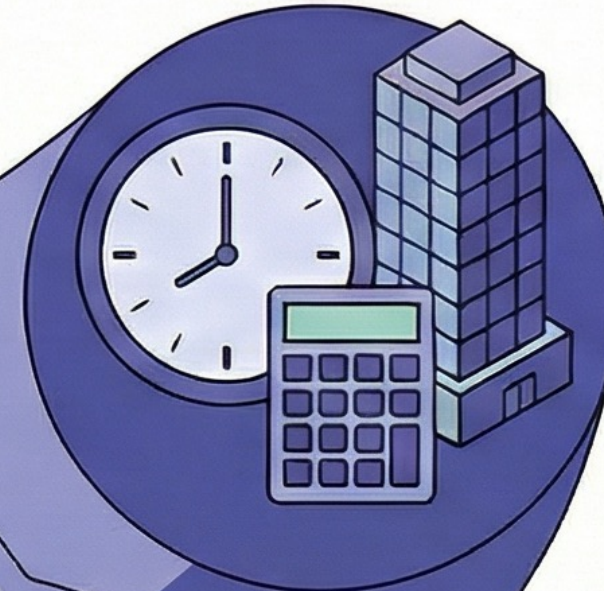
Imagined Purpose:
A site of slow scholarship, critique, and public reasoning.



PLURALIST

Core Moral Commitment:
Ecological responsibility

Imagined Purpose:
A “knowledge ecology” sustaining planetary and multispecies futures.



MANAGERIALISM

The current institutional “tiff” stems from one configuration—Managerialism—becoming the dominant organizing logic, overwhelming all other visions.

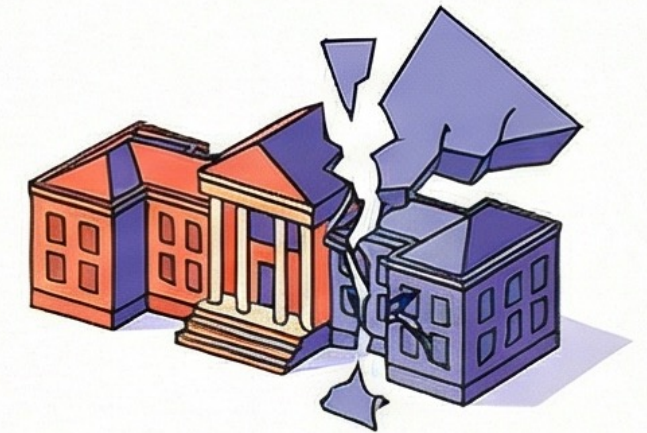
THE HEGEMONY OF MANAGERIALISM

Efficiency and performance metrics now reframe scientific autonomy and humanistic purpose as “outputs.”



“BEES LEAVING THE HIVE”

A metaphor for the loss of collective vocation and “spirit” under metric-driven governance.



THE ONTOLOGICAL CRISIS

Crisis occurs when the institution is asked to satisfy four incompatible regimes simultaneously.



Humanistic

- **The university as a place for Bildung**

Slow formation of judgement, character, and critical capacity

- **The teacher-scholar**

Values: Collegiality, dialogue, ethical reasoning, civic responsibility, freedom to think without immediate application.

- **Hard to quantify**

Difficult to defend publicly, in grant applications, against budget cuts etc...



Technocratic

- **The university as an engine of discovery & progress**
Dominant register of innovation and national competitiveness.
- **The scientist, the innovator**
Authority grounded in scientific expertise and rigorous method
- **Measure of success through outputs**
Publications, patents, citations, etc.



Managerial

- **The university as an organization to be governed & made accountable**
- **The manager**
Values: Efficiency, productivity, competitiveness, value for money
Tools: performance metrics, KPIs etc.
- **Audit culture**
Evaluation becomes both a moral and an epistemic practice (Strathern)



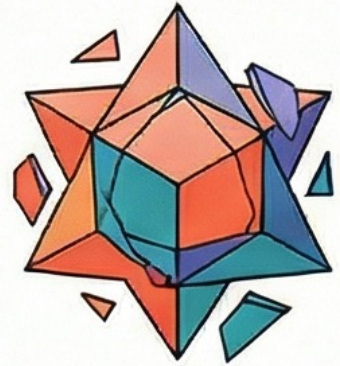
Posthuman

- **The university as a place for care, interdependence, planetary responsibility.**
- **Beyond humans**
Draws on: feminist & indigenous epistemologies, multispecies thinking, environmental humanities.
- **Most radical & imaginative**
Anthropocene as a moral challenge.
What counts as knowledge? Who is knowledge for?

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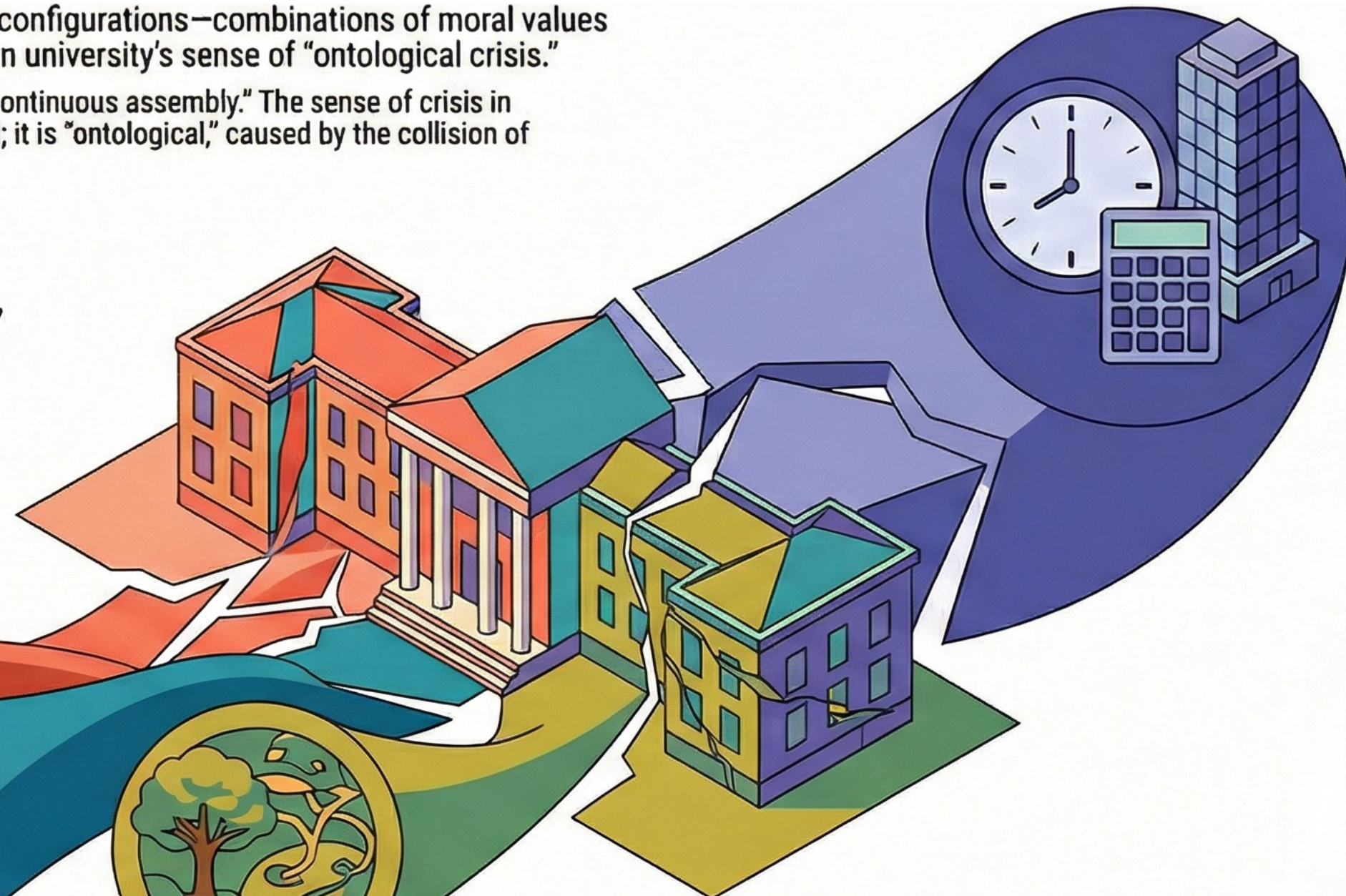
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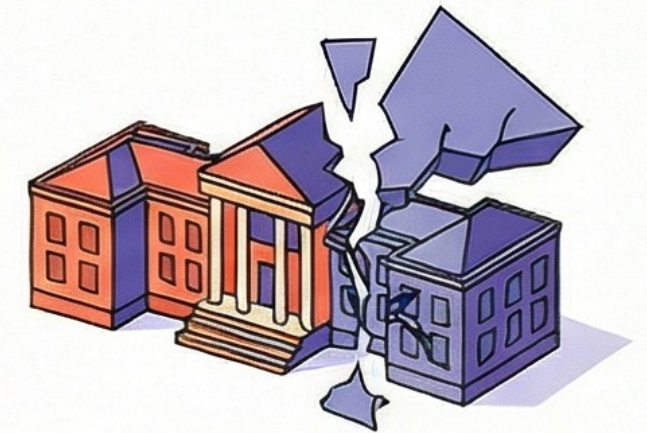
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By Ronald Purser



01

AI accelerates the corporatization of the university

02

The “Chativersity” produces simulated learning

03

A cheating–AI feedback loop normalizes epistemic collapse

04

AI reshapes cognition and undermines the purpose of education

monika
KOSTERA

the
UNIVERSITY
OF HOPE

OXFORD



Monika Kostera





You're part of a small group
helping to create a new
university! You have 5 minutes
to agree on your university's
motto & seal.







NTNU

Kunnskap for en bedre verden



“

*Time brings
Truth to
light*

– Woodcut illustration
Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis* (1626)