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Contract research, universities and the 'knowledge society': back to the future

Noel Castree

University of Wollongong, ncastree@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Many chapters in this book focus on contract research (hereafter CR), but mine differs from these in three respects. First, rather than focus on CR in its own right I want to situate it in a much wider landscape of knowledge production, circulation and consumption. My reason for doing so is simple: we cannot possibly form a view on the why and wherefore of CR unless we understand the broader epistemic context in which it currently exists. As we'll see, in this context CR appears as just one instance of a widespread shift to seeing knowledge as a means to fairly well-defined ends. Secondly, I want to pay very close attention to the university as an institution where, it seems, ever more CR is occurring. The increasing prominence of the latter in the former is part of a profound post-1970s shift in the political and moral economy of Western higher education. This sea-change has comprised one very particular answer to the venerable and intimately related questions: 'what is a university?' and 'what is a university for?'. Note that I pose these questions in very general terms. My aim here is not to comment on one or other actually-existing university but, instead, to consider the *modus operandi* of any institution that would take this name as its own (rather than any other). Thirdly, I wish to be highly normative. I am going to present some proposals about what ought to happen in the future based on what I take to currently be the case. It seems to me wrong-headed to presume that whatever happens to occur in universities at any given time necessarily constitutes a sufficient answer to the questions just posed.

Keywords

society, knowledge, back, universities, future, contract, research

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Introduction

Many chapters in this book focus on contract research (hereafter CR), but mine differs from these in three respects. First, rather than focus on CR in its own right I want to situate it in a much wider landscape of knowledge production, circulation and consumption. My reason for doing so is simple: we cannot possibly form a view on the why and wherefore of CR unless we understand the broader epistemic context in which it currently exists. As we’ll see, in this context CR appears as just one instance of a widespread shift to seeing knowledge as a means to fairly well-defined ends. Secondly, I want to pay very close attention to the university as an institution where, it seems, ever more CR is occurring. The increasing prominence of the latter in the former is part of a profound post-1970s shift in the political and moral economy of Western higher education. This sea-change has comprised one very particular answer to the venerable and intimately related questions: ‘what is a university?’ and ‘what is a university for?’. Note that I pose these questions in very general terms. My aim here is not to comment on one or other actually-existing university but, instead, to consider the *modus operandi* of any institution that would take this name as its own (rather than any other). Thirdly, I wish to be highly normative. I am going to present some proposals about what *ought* to happen in the future based on what I take to currently be the case. It seems to me wrong-headed to presume that whatever happens to occur in universities at any given time necessarily constitutes a sufficient answer to the questions just posed.

My argument will be that most or even all CR in universities could and should be located in other institutional environments. This dovetails with my wider belief that universities are increasingly being obliged to do things that detract from important functions that other contemporary institutions are unable (or unwilling) to perform. These functions speak to the role of knowledge in societies that aspire – more than rhetorically – to be democratic in character. Throughout, I will draw upon my experience of the British higher education system. My, perhaps controversial, belief is that most people who currently work in universities are unable to provide an intelligent and considered answer to the two questions posed above. The same might be said of the many constituencies who perceive some need or benefit from paying for the ‘services’ universities now provide. I therefore hope that readers of this chapter unaccustomed to thinking systematically about the university sector they either inhabit, or turn to for assistance, will benefit from the experience – even if they ultimately disagree with my substantive argument.

Contract research in the contemporary university

The rise of campus-based CR

Research undertaken to meet the needs of a client in return for money (or, on occasion, something else) need not occur in universities, but these days seems to more and more. The ESRC seminar series from which this book emerged is testament to the fact: the growth in university-based CR has been such as to raise wider questions about its impacts on academics and academia. One indication of its current institutional significance is the proliferation of research centres of the sort that Gary Bridge (this volume) writes about. Indeed, my own personal experience of CR occurred precisely within the confines of such a centre. At the turn of the millennium I was for 3 months involved in an interim assessment – funded by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – of the British New Deal for Communities programme as it was unfolding in east Manchester. It was not an edifying experience. The quality of the ‘research’ undertaken was, in my view, very poor indeed. The reasons for this were rather complex, but did not include a lack of effort or integrity on the part of the research team. As a junior player in the local assessment I took the money and moved on – or rather ‘back’ to my usual activities as a ‘regular’ academic employed to undertake both peer review research and educate degree students. My experience as a contract researcher did not noticeably alter my practices as a university lecturer. But nor did it inspire me to want to ‘switch roles’ again in the future, either by being re-employed by the Centre for Urban Policy Research (CUPS) or by seeking to emulate its director (my Manchester colleague and friend Professor Brian Robson).

I do not offer this anecdote in order to condemn contract research; mine could well be an atypical experience. It would be facile to infer that just because some CR is of questionable quality that the whole enterprise is bankrupt. In any case, CR on a large scale is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. Central government departments, charities, foundations, non-governmental organisations, transnational companies, trade associations, local authorities, think tanks, pressure groups, trades unions, and many other organisations today routinely pay for knowledge – be it factual or conceptual, quantitative or qualitative, applied or theoretical, cognitive or moral. They put this knowledge to a diversity of uses – for instance, to alter public debates, to shape government policy, to advance a specific economic agenda, or to train their employees. In short, even those cynical about the quality typical of research undertaken for external clients cannot plausibly argue that we ought to turn back the hands of time and have far less of it – at least not any time soon.

The question then becomes this: if CR is now a major part of our epistemic landscape, then where – institutionally speaking – is it best undertaken? Clearly, many university chancellors, deans, departmental heads and practising contract researchers believe the answer is in ‘red brick’ institutions like my own or in the kind of ‘enterprising university’ discussed in Chris Allen and Pauline Marne’s chapter. Support for this belief, to the extent that it’s been publicly articulated, seems to rest on four arguments. First, universities possess the research capacity that most of those who contract

research simply do not possess. Second, because universities' 'core funding' has either remained static or declined relative to rising costs, they are increasingly obliged to generate additional income by becoming service providers. Third, because virtually all universities experience this obligation – at least in highly centralised higher education systems like Britain's – then competition for a share of the lucrative CR 'market' becomes unavoidable (leading to a 'you've got to be in it to win it' mentality). Finally, and more positively, because universities in a country like Britain are overwhelmingly 'public' in character then contract research is deemed consistent with their mission to serve a wide array of actors and institutions in civil society, including the national state apparatus which provides their core funding.

Should CR occur on-campus?

Those not persuaded by these arguments fall into two camps. Some regard themselves as pragmatists or realists. They aim to make the best of a less than ideal situation. The logic of their argument is pretty plausible, and goes something like this: university-based CR generates much needed revenue, is often intellectually stimulating, offers a chance for researchers to influence non-university constituencies, and is 'relevant' in ways that 'academic research' usually never is. While there is always the risk that the contract researcher becomes servile or, in Allen's (2005) more subtle terms, 'docile', the argument is that this risk is worth taking. After all, in the social relations of contract research, the academic can – depending on the situation – be positioned as a 'partner', a 'consultant' or even an 'expert' to be deferred to (see Manzi and Smith-Blowers, this volume). To suggest otherwise, as Rob Imrie (this volume) rightly reminds us, is to reduce CR to some putative 'essence' that is little more than a caricature, and whose empirical inaccuracy is demonstrated readily. In any case, even if CR does sometimes threaten academics' independence and academic standards, it does not – some say – 'spill over' in its effects *systematically*, and thus 'taint' the conduct of all that research funded without strings attached.

Unlike the pragmatist-realist position, idealists see the recent growth of university-based CR as either compromising or departing from the core mission of a university. I call them idealists, not because they are idle dreamers – far from it – but because their critique bites by virtue of the gap between posited ideals and the actualities of campus life today. One of these is the sociologist and philosopher of science Steve Fuller, who is among the most interesting theorists writing about universities in so-called 'knowledge societies' like our own. In his book *Knowledge management foundations* (2002), Fuller suggests that the growing cadre of campus-based contract workers – specifically, those lacking permanent academic contracts – pose a serious threat to the 'proper' identity and role of universities. The thrust of his argument is two-fold. First, he argues that there is no necessary link between universities as institutions and CR: in other words, contract researchers and their managers are usually

undertaking epistemic work that could, in principle, occur in independent research institutes, foundations and centres. Their presence on campus is thus entirely contingent, yet this inevitably alters the universities' sense of self as CR becomes a normal part of their business. Secondly, Fuller argues that universities – because of their history and its tangible legacy – often offer contract researchers precious little reason to value them as distinctive or special institutions. For instance, these researchers endure insecure employment on rolling contracts and are materially dependent on the money of external clients; and, to offer a second example, it may be hard for them to use material from a piece of jointly-undertaken CR in the service of, say, a single-authored peer review publication that may help them get a permanent academic post. Whatever an individual contract researcher's personal experience, seen in aggregate they comprise a major section of the large, 'flexible', casualised workforce that now inhabits Western universities. This workforce, Fuller argues, has little reason to see universities as more than convenient locations for the conduct of their professional activities. Indeed, its members may come to resent the 'academic freedom' enjoyed by academics on permanent contracts, and be inclined to support measures that undermine the relative autonomy that many universities have traditionally enjoyed from paymasters, special interests and the visible hand of government interference in their affairs.

I will discuss Fuller's normative vision for the university later. For now, I simply note that his views on contract researchers do not concern the fine details of their relations with clients, and how this may affect the conduct and outputs of inquiry. Interesting though these details might be, they do not speak to Fuller's more fundamental concern. This is with whether institutions that call themselves 'universities' should be in the business of selling knowledge and thus embroiling more and more of their members in contractual relations with myriad other parties. But the marketisation of both research and researchers is, of course, simply one part of a much larger story about universities in the 'knowledge society'. It's a story to which I turn in the next two sections.

Universities in the 21st century 'knowledge society'

Western universities were once elite institutions in which a few scholar-teachers educated a small cadre of would-be leaders. They were relatively insulated from the wider society. This began to change quite rapidly in the 1960s. Four decades on and universities enjoy a greater importance than ever before, both nationally and globally. Such is the scale and diversity of their activities that they've become key institutions for a wide range of what we've learnt to call 'stakeholders'. Universities' centrality to the business of CR is simply one aspect of this. They have made themselves – or, we might say, have been made into – key institutions in a range of other areas too. This has been done by consolidating what, historically speaking, was their far from complete monopoly in two domains: namely, creating and disseminating new high-level

knowledge (i.e. research and teaching), and certifying advanced knowledge, advanced skills and those who master them (i.e. awarding credentials and being seen to embody standards of ‘truth’, ‘rigour’ ‘objectivity’ etc.). In the last 30 years, these expanded historic functions have formed the basis of what Alan and Marten Shipman (2006), in their book *Knowledge monopolies*, call ‘the academisation of society’. By this they mean that ever-more social actors must now attend, or solicit the services of, universities if they are to realise their own aims and agendas.

If we take Britain, this ‘academisation’ is obvious at the educational level. During the 1960s only 7% of 18-21 year olds attended university, whereas today it is over 30% (which is itself some way short of New Labour’s ambitious 1997 pledge to make it 50%). A minimum of three years degree level study is now a virtual requirement if students are to secure even half-interesting, half-remunerative employment. Many choose to stay on for a masters degree in order to give themselves a competitive edge in the labour market or simply buy some time before entering it. Not a few pursue a PhD or an MPhil – four times more than 30 years ago, in fact – and for many this is a necessity in order to get an often insecure and not always well paid research or teaching post in a university. This massive expansion in the number of British university graduates has coincided with a sharp increase in the number of overseas students, especially at postgraduate level. For instance, in my own school at Manchester University we educate hundreds of African, Asian and Latin American students who hope to return home and enter the business of ‘development’. Likewise, in my next-door building, colleagues at Manchester Business School train and certify candidates from virtually every country on the planet. Examples like these are dime-a-dozen. Where students cannot be educated on-site, universities have set about providing all manner of distance learning courses at certificate, diploma and degree levels.

In addition to their ramped-up teaching and credentialising functions, British universities’ research is also enjoying heightened prominence – quite aside from the CR already discussed. The British research councils, for example, pump considerable money into investigative programmes focused on public policy challenges, new technologies, or current issues of consequence (such as climate change mitigation and adaptation). Then there are all those science and business parks that have popped-up adjacent to university campuses, where spin-off companies can be incubated and intellectual property rights (e.g. patents) claimed with the help of new university IP officers. Though an awful lot of ‘blue skies’ research still occurs (its relative importance being measured in new international league tables, like the Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking that preoccupies my own institution), the academic *zeitgeist* dictates that universities produce knowledge that is ‘useful’ and ‘relevant’ in ways that are tangible for various sections of government, the business community or civil society. New Labour has made appreciable sums of ‘third stream’ funding available to this end. Even the PhD – once a marker of someone’s capacity to

undertake research independently – is today responsive to socio-economic agendas (as the rise of ‘professional doctorates’, ‘executive PhDs’ and ‘CASE studentships’ attest). Across the board, there is now a lot of talk about ‘users’ and ‘knowledge transfer’ – with the latter these days a significant criteria for promotion among permanent academic staff in my own university. It’s thus clear that the purported shift to a ‘mode 2’ style of knowledge production cross-cuts the otherwise clear distinction between contract-only researchers and permanent academic staff ostensibly funded from the public purse. University research in Britain is increasingly important to those who are not themselves in the business of doing research.

In sum, universities in countries like Britain today enjoy a power and prominence unprecedented in their (often long) histories. But has their new-found importance altered their very character? And, if so, is it for the better? In answer to the first question most people with long enough memories would almost certainly say ‘yes’. Many believe that Western universities’ enhanced domestic significance has come at a price: namely, a creeping subordination of their own ideals and practices to those of external users of the universities’ stock-in-trade, knowledge. In both their pedagogic and research functions, the knowledge that universities produce is, it seems, increasingly responsive to others’ agendas – as I intimated in the previous paragraph. In the next section I will briefly describe and explain this diminution in relative autonomy, taking the British case once more. Given how many under-30s now work in the British system, and given how many baby-boomers have recently retired, the number of university people who have actually experienced the changes recounted below is fast-diminishing. The result could easily be an incremental loss of critical perspective and critical distance on these changes.

Universities: measured, monitored, managed and massified

“The ... transformation of universities over the past 25 years”, writes Alex Callinicos (2006: 34), “has been relentless, but it has also been piecemeal. Change has come not abruptly, but through a process of drip, drip, drip”. In the British case, perhaps the most striking feature of this transformation is that it’s been externally *imposed* rather than being initiated or led by those who inhabit universities professionally. Specifically, successive Conservative and Labour governments have intentionally redefined the relationship between universities and the wider society. Their success has been achieved, in large part, because of British universities’ dependence on tax-payer money for survival: the proverbial piper has been able to call the tune, once it made up its mind to do so. Academics have, by and large, danced to the new music – indeed, many are enjoying successful careers on this basis. So, what is the new moral economy – or, as critic Gillian Howie (2005) would have it, ‘company policy’ – that academics have been obliged to buy into?

The instrumentalisation of academic knowledge

As many commentators have observed, it is one in which *knowledge is presumed to be useful and/or measurable*. Utility implies that knowledge can meet clearly defined ends external to itself – be they economic, social, cultural, political or environmental. Measurability implies that knowledge can be summarised in one or other metric that comes to represent its utility comparatively or, if not this, then some other thing that can be similarly graded (such as ‘quality’ or ‘excellence’). Though utility is not synonymous with whether or not knowledge aids national economic growth and competitiveness, it’s fair to say that this has been a running theme in central government policy on universities. It has been evident in successive pronouncements made by past and present ministers, including David Blunkett, Lord David Sainsbury, Charles Clarke and Peter Mandelson; it’s been evident in the language animating the several national reviews of universities this last quarter century (including those by Ron Dearing and Richard Lambert); and, at the time of writing, it’s evident in the fact the universities are overseen by a Cabinet minister whose portfolio includes business and industry. Indeed, this minister – in a recent letter to *The Guardian* newspaper – described British universities as “a *critical* part of our *knowledge economy*” (Mandelson, 2010: 37, emphasis added). Of course, these universities have, at some level, *always* responded to central government agendas – since even before the Robbins review of 1963 and Prime Minister James Callaghan’s famous 1976 speech at Ruskin College. So what explains central government’s determination to make them *even more* responsive since roughly 1988, when the Education Reform Act was passed?

One answer lies in the already-mentioned concept of the ‘knowledge society’, and the related terms ‘knowledge economy’ (used by Mandelson) and ‘knowledge capitalism’. At a global level, the OECD report *The knowledge-based economy* (1996) and the World Bank report *Knowledge for development* (1998) helped to popularise an emerging idea among policy makers that education was an undervalued form of knowledge capital. The argument was that equipping more people with knowledge and skills would bring its own rewards in a hyper-competitive global economy. In Britain, this argument was embodied in the 1999 Department of Trade and Industry White Paper *Our competitive future: building the knowledge driven economy* (a successor document to a 1993 White Paper advancing the idea of an ‘enterprise culture’). The suggestion was the Britain’s ‘post-industrial’ future lay in it exporting knowledge-based services and products to the rest of the world. The emphasis would be on higher value-added commodities and on continuous innovation.

On the educational side, it’s precisely this argument which has been used to justify the massive increase in the number of students entering university to take one or other academic, applied or vocational course. These students are thereby seen to enhance their ‘human capital’ and long-term earnings potential, while providing society with new generations of well-educated people accustomed to the idea of ‘lifelong learning’ (and thus ‘flexible’ about their skills and occupations). Students are here invited to view themselves as

investors in their future and as consumers of an educational service – especially now that so many must undertake paid-employment during their university years and pay tuition fees too. Universities, conversely, are invited to see students as clients whose needs and wants must be satisfied – the new National Student Survey being just one tool through which this is achieved. Indeed, students are seen as a ‘market’ that universities must compete for, and an especially lucrative one in the case of overseas applicants paying premium fees (Britain is a major destination for such students). It is a moot point whether all this is simply reproducing existing patterns of social inequality, with a few universities accrediting a minority of upper middle class students to be tomorrow’s economic and political elite, while students from less fortunate back-grounds end-up as a mass of ‘generic workers’ with limited prospects. So much for ‘widening access’.

On the research side, the idea that knowledge ought to have an exchange value is evident in the several-fold increase in intellectual property claims filed by British academics since 1990 – especially in the physical and biomedical sciences. But the perceived value of research goes well beyond commerce, as much university-based CR attests. Knowledge produced through systematic inquiry is today seen as vital in order to address a range of public policy problems and to serve the needs of diverse civil society organisations. This is now very evident in the way the British research councils address prospective winners of grants. That a commitment to ‘utility’ in research has seeped into the mind-set of academics is evident in my own discipline, human geography. Just after I embarked upon an academic career, a set of often angst-ridden debates occurred in the pages of peer review journals and at annual conferences. Stretching over several years, they concerned ‘policy relevance’, ‘academic activism’, ‘participatory research’ and engaging with ‘publics’. Notwithstanding the differences of detail between these debates, the common presumption was that research can and should *have immediate and tangible effects*. Interestingly, when commentators felt that such effects could not be detected, they worried deeply about the well-being of human geography – with non-effects unthinkingly equated with ‘irrelevance’.

Measuring knowledge, controlling academic ‘knowledge workers’

If utility is now almost a synonym for ‘worthwhile knowledge’ in universities, the idea that knowledge is measurable has also become routinised. This goes beyond the central state’s determination to ensure capital accumulation. It also reflects a belief, articulated during the Thatcher era, that publicly funded institutions must ensure ‘value for money’ and be run ‘efficiently’ so that resources are not unduly wasted. This belief survived Thatcherism and the fiscal stringency of the 1980s, living-on during the economic ‘boom’ that New Labour presided over up until the recent financial crisis. In research, the several RAEs (Research Assessment Exercises) demonstrate as much, with their competitive, banded allocation of non-teaching monies. In teaching, the now

defunct Quality Assurance Agency regime introduced the idea of close monitoring of academics' pedagogy. This idea finds contemporary expression in student evaluations of almost every module they take, and in routine assessments of entire degree programmes by some mixture of internal and external evaluators. It also finds expression in recently instituted complaints and grievance procedures (for instance, as Head of Discipline I will spend a lot of this summer dealing with student appeals against their final degree classification). The measurement of research and teaching, along with campus facilities, reach its apotheosis in various university national and global league tables. Today, these quantitative exercises assume a degree of authority and importance unimagineable 25 years ago.

Measurement is, of course, of a piece with the 'audit culture' that is today pervasive, not only in universities but in all British public sector organisations. The constant monitoring, checking and assessment of public sector employees' activities performance has become normalized within the space of a generation. The national Time Allocation Surveys (TACs) are one of many examples, with British academics periodically obliged to record the time they devote to different professional activities over two randomly chosen weeks. Another example is the annual PDR (personal development review) undergone by academics at all levels of the university system. At Manchester, to offer a third example, we are currently undergoing an individualised, institution-wide Research Profiling Exercise, a sort of internal RAE (or REF, as it will be called in the future). The essence of audit is that those subject to it must be held accountable, and that accountability can only be guaranteed by frequent exercises in recording performance and feeding the results back to auditees. In universities, audit presently take two forms: bureaucratic (i.e. professional, peer audit) and consumerist (i.e. client-led). In itself, audit is no bad thing. However, there is a difference between audit that's self-imposed, organic and voluntary – such as the long-standing external examiner system for British university degrees – and audit imposed on those who become subject to its rationalities. Overwhelmingly, British universities' current audit culture is a product of central government diktat.

Remarkably, British academics socialised under pre-Thatcher regimes acceded to all this through the 1980s and 90s, and offered little or no resistance. As I said earlier, their younger successors are equally compliant, often lacking the historic experience with which to measure the degree of systemic change. Unlike their French counterparts, recently in uproar about Nicolas Sarkozy's proposals for university reform (see Pinson, this volume), British academics remain quiescent and thus complicit. We can speculate about the reasons why the imposition of elaborate surveillance systems has been tolerated. It may be the considerable financial power possessed by central government departments and agencies. In real terms, the unit of resource per staff member and student has declined since the early 1980s, and in the competition for public resources it could well be that universities have seen

submission to government targets and agendas as being in their short-term interest. Academics' compliance could also have a lot to do with the new, top-down managerialism that has undoubtedly triumphed in British universities, and which concentrates power in the hands of vice-chancellors, deans, departmental heads, and their administrative teams. It has led many (most?) academics to regard themselves as employees rather than members of a professional community. However, this begs the question of why such managerialism was tolerated in the first place. One possibility is that some academics were attracted by the prospect of greater managerial authority over colleagues and supported attacks on the latter's notional equality and historic right to self-governance. Another is that British academics' have a weak track record of collective action and lack the necessary political astuteness to win strategic battles; they have always tended to operate as individuals, albeit within a wider department, faculty or centre. This is especially true in the social sciences and humanities. In that context, the costs of speaking out against new initiatives or refusing to comply with them can be very high indeed.

Regardless of the reasons, the fact remains that British universities today are highly managed and regulated institutions – so much so that they're 'McUniversities' according to some, the academic equivalent of large-scale private firms. Ironically, in a supposedly 'neoliberal era', they have been "victims of one of the last great experiments in central state planning" (Gamble, 2004: 50). With internal control relatively strong, academics have been made to adapt their teaching and research – sometimes willingly, often unconsciously – to the perceived demands of government, business and civil society actors. Many believe that this amounts not simply to their 'deprofessionalisation' but to something more profound: namely, a deep remaking of academic subjectivities.

Reimagining the university 1: looking backwards

I have suggested that British universities are today institutions of considerable national importance, but that they have bought enhanced influence at a certain price: namely, a diminution in their relative autonomy from non-academic actors and organisations. I have further argued that this erosion of independence has been forced upon universities by successive national governments, eliciting little opposition. Clearly, I have moved well beyond a discussion of CR per se. But this seems to me legitimate, because the significance of CR for the universities where so much of it today occurs can only be understood with reference to the wider context described in the previous two sections. In the rest of this chapter I want to move from a diagnostic towards a normative mode of argumentation. I am going to provide a positive answer to the two questions about universities posed at the outset. I suspect that most readers of this book are like most people who work in universities, or who utilise their services: that is to say, I'd wager they possess few alternative ideas regarding what universities should and could be like.

Though there's a very rich literature critical of the changes recounted above, it is not – alas – widely read by those affected by, or leading, these changes. My own case proceeds in four stages. In thinking about the future of British universities, I begin (in this section) by talking about universities in the past. As we'll see, the history is instructive. It provides food for thought for the many university personnel who have little precious little sense of the functional specificity their institutions should arguably possess.

Though some are wont to talk about 'the university' in the singular – as if it has a timeless essence that's more-or-less realised by universities in any given time or place – the reality is that there has never been just one conception of its character and role. Medieval European universities were typically "autonomous, self-funding, limited liability corporations, with many of the same characteristics as ancient republics" (Fuller, 2002: 216). In its original sense, a corporation was an institutionalised community of practitioners willing to abide by certain norms internal to the community itself. As well as universities, guilds, religious orders, and cities were granted 'corporate' status. To join a corporation "typically required negotiating one's identity through examination or election, as well being willing to become something other than one already is" (Fuller, 2003: 121). Corporations bound otherwise different individuals into a collective that emphasised shared goals, standards and duties. By the nineteenth century, this corporate identity – based on an institutional capacity to resist external pressures – had morphed into something rather different. There were three national models, each with a totemic champion.

The British model, based on Oxbridge, regarded the university as a place for educating 'well rounded people'. Academics were largely teachers (not researchers), and related to students in parental mode as members of one university fraternity. By insisting on students' residency in a college, this Newmanesque model made the university a finishing school for the lucky few. In turn, they'd assume leadership roles in the church, politics and the secular professions, while together upholding a strong sense of 'national culture'. In France, by contrast, Napoleon Bonaparte ensured that higher education became hard-wired to the felt needs of government and nation. The system of specialised *grandes ecoles* was created in order to produce new cadres of certified professionals in engineering, mining, the law and so on. These professionals would be specialists, inculcated with an ethic of public service and confident in their own expertise. France's existing universities never really got out from under the shadow of the *grand ecoles* once the latter were set-up. Finally, there was the German model of the university as a place where research and teaching were sides of the same coin. Inspired by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the medieval corporate model was updated so that academics would be free to undertake research which, in and through the act of teaching, would be codified in growing bodies of disciplinary knowledge. Towards the end of their studies students would be addressing the very questions that perplexed and energised

their teachers, thus ‘thinking for themselves’. This departed from the medieval university model of teaching as, in effect, indoctrination.

The German model, it seems to me, is by no means antiquated. To appreciate its significance, we need to recall the context in which Humboldt’s ideas were formed. A child of the Enlightenment, which itself replayed the dissident ethic of the Protestant Reformation, he saw universities as potential embodiments of the Kantian injunction ‘Dare to know!’ – an injunction whose power arose from the challenge it posed to ecclesiastic, political, monarchical and other forms of authority. For Humboldt, the university would be an agent of change by creating new knowledge and then, through teaching, distributing it to those citizens who had been admitted to the institution before assuming positions in (and perhaps even altering) the wider society. In practice, of course, the Humboldtian ideal was compromised almost from the get go. Because German universities relied so heavily on state funding from the early 19th century, they could only buy their independence at a cost – thus rendering it putative. Freedom of research was guaranteed by the government, but only if academics agreed to educate a new national elite drawn from the aristocracy and emerging bourgeoisie. In this way, the dynamism of research became divorced from teaching, whose function was to ensure social reproduction by way of relatively fixed curricula. Indeed, academic research itself soon congealed into various Kuhnian ‘paradigms’, thus stifling the critical spirit. Meanwhile, growing state demands for ‘relevant research’ were satisfied after Humboldt’s death by the creation of various Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes (now Max Planck Institutes).

This deformation of the German model has occurred beyond Germany. For instance, it has been evident in the British redbrick universities for decades, so too America’s most prestigious public and private universities. This reminds us that the supposed post-1990 ‘break’ in the character of Western universities is a myth. In reality, we have to go back much further in time in order to locate the erosion of their institutional freedom. Here, for example, is Anthony Wilden writing from within the US university sector back in 1972: “not ‘to publish or perish’ in an industry whose product is ‘knowledge’ is unthinkable ... The so-called ‘knowledge explosion’ of the last 30 years has little do with knowledge. It has to do with knowledge as a commodity ...” (pp. xxiii-xxiv). In this light, Fuller offers us an interesting insight on the differences between Western universities during the period of ‘welfare capitalism’ (circa 1945-79) and that of ‘neoliberal globalisation’ (roughly 1980-today). In his view, it’s not that universities have been made qualitatively more responsive to exogenous demands during the latter era. Instead, it’s that the recent sharp decline in the unit of resource provided by the state presents universities with a stark choice: either they more intensively chase alternative sources of income in order to remain as large as they presently are, or else contract and hive-off a number of current functions. I’ll return to this choice below since the current retrenchment in public funding makes it an ever more important one.

Reimagining universities II: the umbilical connection with republican democracy

Having briefly considered different models of the university, I want now to discuss political theory. To my mind, it's impossible to discuss the 'proper' identity and role of universities in abstraction from a worked-up conception of how any society should be governed. This is where some traditional defences of things like 'academic freedom', 'pure inquiry' and 'blue skies research' usually come unstuck. For it's unclear why one would have an institution that promotes any of these without some wider theory of their value or purpose. At worst, defences of universities' autonomy can come across as self-serving pleas for career academics to be left alone – as if universities had no wider social role to play. Following Fuller (2000), I would suggest that civic republicanism provides the necessary rationale for their existence today.

Civic republicanism is conception of democratic rule that is, in the 21st century, more an ideal than an actuality. To understand why it's an ideal worth fighting for, imagine three opposed scenarios in the production and consumption of knowledge (cf Fuller *ibid.* 11-15). In the first, only those who can pay for knowledge – as either contractors or students/learners – determine its quantity and quality. The market rules and is justified in liberal terms: individuals are entitled to whatever knowledge they want, so long as they can pay. Epistemic workers are thus enjoined to give the market what it wants. In the second scenario, only knowledge that does not pose a threat to existing orthodoxy or established group identities can be produced and disseminated. Anything else is deemed to risky, controversial or destabilising. Epistemic workers thus operate within existing frameworks and steer clear of radically new knowledge. In the third scenario a few especially well-endowed public and private funders pay for research and teaching on their own terms. Epistemic workers are thus disempowered and become ciphers of dominant interests. The problems with all three scenarios are obvious enough. Given the economic inequality characteristic of all contemporary societies, the first scenario equates to financial censorship and the silencing of those who lack the resources to enter the market. In the second scenario the problem is one of ideological censorship: people become afraid to provide alternative insights on the world for fear of offending current opinion or the beliefs of particular social groups. In the third scenario censorship arises because of stark asymmetries of institutional power: a few dominant actors call the epistemic shots for everyone else. Thus, in all three cases knowledge becomes subject to very sharp constraints, be they economic, social or political.

In contrast to all this, a civic republican abhors undue censorship and places a premium on epistemic diversity, dialogue, dissent and the formation of a never-final consensus. Civic republicans regard all adult members of a polity as, in principle, equals in two senses: (i) they have a right to be heard as individuals, and (ii) they have an obligation to comment on matters of common

concern insofar as they belong to a society in which their own lives are necessarily affected by the thoughts and actions of other citizens. In respect of the latter, ‘the common interest’ goes far beyond matters that are formally ‘political’, such as immigration policy, healthcare provision or environmental policy. It also includes all those questions that speak to the intellectual, emotional and physical lives of contemporary citizens: questions such ‘who am I?’, ‘why is the world as it is?’, ‘what are my values?’, ‘are we alone in the universe?’, ‘how should I live’, and ‘why do other people not share my own beliefs?’. The civic republican ideal is a genuinely ‘open society’ where all existing norms, values, beliefs, identities and prejudices can be questioned, not by resort to physical conflict but through discursive conflict – conducted according to agreed standards of rationality and civility. This is very much an ideal – in the sense of an aspiration – because civic republicans are acutely sensitive to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which knowledge of all kinds comes to reflect the perverse logics operative in the three above-mentioned scenarios. The ideal’s rationale is simple: unless epistemic diversity, dialogue and critique is properly institutionalised, individuals can easily become the victims of others’ agendas or else passive believers of others’ ideas – often without knowing it.

Clearly, for civic republicanism to be more than an ideal one needs citizens who are not only well educated – that is, both knowledgeable and able to ask pertinent and probing questions. They also need to be secure in their own right to speak, and to be confident enough to learn from others’ knowledge and to admit their own errors when necessary. In this context, we get a clearer sense of Humboldt’s original vision of the university as a quasi-autonomous institution committed to the unity of advanced research and teaching. Through research new ideas, facts and insights are *created* that may *challenge* existing cognitive, moral or aesthetic mindsets. So long as this research meets standards of rigour certified by the wider research community then it’s deemed acceptable, regardless of its precise content. Through teaching, this research is *disseminated* beyond its originators, but *not* as a potential new dogma that will replace current orthodoxy. Instead, through well constructed curricula students are exposed to a range of not necessarily consistent or commensurable knowledge-claims. They learn to accept, reject or synthesise them through a process of careful consideration whose end-point is not ‘Truth’ but a set of provisional understandings that might, in time, be found wanting and thus in need of revision. In this way they come to embody the ethic of ‘the open society’. For them, knowledge is not simply a ‘positional good’ that confers a personal advantage to those who possess it; instead, it’s seen as constitutively social.

Given all this, if the young Humboldt – who was a civic republican – were alive today he would shake his head at the state of British universities. First, he would object to the volume of vocational teaching and training in the sector, most of its divorced from any ‘research frontier’. Second, he would

object to the number of ‘professional schools’ found on campus, again because their aim is to inculcate knowledge on an instrumental means-ends basis. Third, he would object to campus-based CR, because it’s too often client-driven and divorced from the university’s pedagogic functions. Fourth, he would lament the growing divide between research (as measured by the RAE/REF system) and increasingly mechanical forms of undergraduate teaching (which are measured by different metrics, and where text-books, worsening staff-student ratios and fewer tutorials/seminars are the norm). In the fifth place, he would regard the fracturing of many academic subjects (like human geography) into relatively discrete, mutually indifferent research communities as an abrogation of the critical, dialogical spirit of civic republicanism. He would say the same of disciplines like economics, in which major paradigms crowd-out alternative perspectives and are too powerful. Finally, he would object to the British state’s attempt to subordinate universities to the executive’s agenda on the following grounds: there ought to be distinction between the state as a public institution which guarantees those public goods necessary for a healthy democracy to function, and the particular ideological aims of any ruling party. Once ruling parties reconfigure public institutions to suit their own partisan ends then the very basis of democracy starts to be eroded.

Let me be clear. Humboldt, like any civic republican, would not object to many of the things that today occur on British university campuses on principle. It’s not the practices *per se* that are in question. Instead, the objection would be this: many of those things should occur *elsewhere*, in different institutions with distinct missions – such as the former polytechnics, independent foundations, corporate laboratories, specialist training institutes, government research centres, and so on. For Humboldt, a university is not only a very *specific* institution in terms of its identity and goals; it is also *necessary*, though by no means sufficient, for the achievement of a genuinely self-governing society

Reimagining universities III: sustaining the public sphere

To round-out this normative vision of the university today, in light of long-term erosion of its institutional autonomy in Britain and elsewhere, let me briefly connect it to the idea and reality of ‘the public’. One of the great ironies of contemporary Britain is this: we have more graduates and a supposedly more educated citizenry than ever before in our history, and yet there’s a widespread feeling that ignorance, philistinism, and a preference for ‘infotainment’ define our cultural milieu. This concern has been expressed by liberals and social democrats as much as it has by cultural conservatives. Membership of political parties is in sharp decline; voter turn-outs are appallingly low; trust in politicians, the political process and the integrity of public institutions has reached its nadir; the ‘serious’ parts of the print, televisual and online media are greatly outweighed by those dedicated to light entertainment, sensationalism and the cult of celebrity; public broadcasting has

given way to private provision; shopping and consumption have become central to many people's weekly routines and sense of self; and it seems that 'leisure', in all its forms, has become the dominant activity when people are not at work.

All this would be fine if Britain – like all major capitalist democracies – did not face a set of extraordinary domestic and international challenges. These include: coping with a major financial crisis and reconfiguring the country's economic base; responding to the twin threats of energy insecurity and the effects of carbon-dependency on the earth-atmosphere system; dealing with a multi-cultural society in which recent immigrants loom large, in the context of the 'war on terror' and radical Muslim insurgency; creating a transport infrastructure that is fast, affordable, reliable and 'clean'; coping with a growing number of retired and elderly people; dealing with persistent social inequality along the axes of class, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference and geographic location; and determining what our role should be in a world where US power is on the wane and the power of major far eastern countries is on the rise. These are, of course, all questions of public policy and politics, but there are others to ponder too. Consider these examples: religious leaders like Archbishop Rowan Williams have persistently asked about the quality and substance of Briton's spiritual lives; environmentalists like George Monbiot have consistently challenged prevailing practices of commodity consumption in the name of social and ecological justice; and social democrats like the journalist Madeleine Bunting have suggested that our 'quality of life' has declined even as many families' material wealth increased through the New Labour boom years. These arguments speak to ever-present questions about the 'good life', about a 'life worth living' and about what is to be human in a world of over 6 billion people whose lives and well-being are codependent.

Williams, Monbiot and Bunting are all, in their different ways, 'public intellectuals' – a species in decline, according to Frank Furedi (2004). That is to say, they speak and write in the hope that people quite unlike themselves will not only consider but possibly be persuaded by what it is they communicate. Like most public intellectuals in Britain, neither Williams, Monbiot nor Bunting are located in a university environment. Does this suggest that British academics have weak ties to the national public and sub-sections thereof? I would argue yes – though this answer, I realise, begs the question of what precisely 'the public' is and why universities should have a relationship with it in the first place. The term public has a close etymological connection to the idea of a republic, a self-governing society of equals in which the interests of individuals and groups must be mediated through the interests of all. It describes a collective willing and able to deliberate on issues of common concern. This collective need not be ethnically or culturally homogenous since a public is not defined by its members' personal or group identity. In Western Europe, where the idea of a public was first made flesh, this collective required a literal and metaphorical 'space' in which it could exist – thus permitting

individuals to take-on an identity outside the spheres of the market, the home and the state. Democrats have always insisted on the need for a proper ‘public sphere’. But if the public inhabiting it is disinterested, ignorant, dogmatic or fearful of discursive conflict then democracy can become nominal rather than substantive. A robust public is thus a *purposeful creation* not a spontaneous invention: it must be slowly built and actively sustained, and this requires effort and resources.

In recent years, many critics have bemoaned what David Marquand (2004) calls ‘the decline of the public’ in Britain and many other Western democracies. This is linked to wider worries that democracy is today in crisis, a contemporary travesty of the ideas proposed by its original champions (such as Tom Paine and John Stuart Mill). If these worries are justified, then we see why a rethinking of the university along the lines I’ve suggested is so important. Universities should be key institutions for equipping individuals to be willing and able members of a genuine public. Their principal role is not to increase national wealth (in the economic sense of ‘wealth’) nor to train the next generation of workers nor to serve the particularistic needs of various named ‘stakeholders’. Ideally, they should equip both their own members, and those who pass through them as students, with the capacity to resist two deformations of ‘the public’ identified by Andrew Gamble (2004). The first relates to complexity and involves a public becoming *cynical* in the face of a world that seems confusing, contradictory and difficult to fathom. The second also relates to complexity and involves a public choosing *populism* because it offers simple and instant solutions to current problems. To my mind, without institutions that can equip people to resist these deformations of their public role, ‘democracy’ becomes increasingly weak. The same can be said when any of the three knowledge pathologies described earlier become a reality. Along with organisations comprising the mass media, universities should – in my view – be pillars sustaining the public domain.

This, it seems to me, is the proper context in which defences of university autonomy and academic freedom should be presented and understood. Otherwise, they can be misunderstood as conservative pleas that professors be allowed to do what they like, regardless. The point of autonomy and freedom, I would argue, is not that the wider world be *shut-out*. Rather, it gives universities a special ability to *resist being colonised by one or other agenda, actor or mindset issuing from beyond it*. Despite the changes recounted earlier in this chapter, British universities – especially Oxbridge and the redbricks – still enjoy a degree of autonomy. Likewise, academic freedom is not (yet) either a myth or an anachronism; it still exists and it needs to be enhanced. What a pity that so many people who still enjoy the protections it affords have no real understanding of why it exists or to what ends it ought to be used.

What is to be done?

In the previous three sections I've made a normative case that amounts to a strong critique of British universities as presently constituted. Clearly, I'm one of the idealists I described earlier in this chapter. It's one thing to present a vision and arguments supporting it; but it's quite another to make this vision come true. In this penultimate section I will present some ideas about how universities might be restructured looking ahead. I'm not saying *every* institution that today possesses the title 'university' should be altered, but that we ensure that we do have institutions whose identity and purpose is consistent with the normative case I've made. My preference is to call these institutions (and *only* these institutions) universities. This preference respects the semantic specificity and history of the term: a university is not a place where all knowledges are synthesised and somehow made complete, but where a wide range of novel or even conflicting evidence, argument, concepts, values and principles are brought into a critical conversation. Note, then, that I see no compelling reason for CR to occur in a university so defined.

British universities, as we've seen, are today 'multiversities'. Their research and teaching together perform a wide range of functions and serve the needs of numerous and varied constituencies. But why do we have so many institutions – over 150 – seeking to do more-or-less the same things more-or-less (un)successfully? Why not encourage these institutions to differentiate and niche themselves? And why continue to have all these institutions beholden to the central state for funding – unless the state can offer guarantees that it will not use all of them as an extension of the specific agendas of elected parties? In light of these questions here are some proposals for change:

1. Create a set of universities whose mission is consistent with that outlined above. These would probably include Oxbridge and a set of redbrick universities, but there may be others too. These institutions should be given a 'fresh start' by having their charters renewed or redescribed.
2. These universities would be genuinely free of undue state interference or the demands of other powerful actors or constituencies. They would be self-governing, implying the end of current managerialist practices, externally-driven audits and a return to democratic decision making.
3. These universities would place a premium on reuniting research and teaching, with both operating in an environment where 'academic freedom' is meaningful. This would achieve a number of things. Academic research published purely for consumption by other academics would decline because 'teachability' would become a key criterion for even the most esoteric research. Students would be exposed to new findings at the 'research frontier', and obliged to evaluate them critically in light of existing bodies of knowledge. This means that textbooks – classically a genre of 'instructional' writing – would find no

place in degrees beyond the first year (unless they subverted the monological textbook conventions).

4. These universities would revisit the idea of a well-designed curriculum for all degrees awarded, thus reversing the drift towards pick-and-mix modular programmes that are often less than sum of their parts. The curricula would, for any subject, be constructed with a civic republican sensibility in mind and cultivate knowledgeable, confident, critically minded graduates. Standards would be high, with a lot of emphasis on formative (not just summative) assessment. The volume and frequency of formal student assessment would decline, and the onus ultimately placed on students for their own learning.
5. These universities would publicly reject the idea that their degrees exist principally in order to train students for paid employment. Likewise, they would publicly reject the idea that their research activities serve the particularistic needs of external parties. They would declare themselves to be 'public' institutions – not necessarily part of the 'public sector' but free-standing entities committed to the ideals of the public domain.
6. These universities would down-size, hive-off a number of current activities and simplify their strategic objectives. Funding would be redeployed towards supporting excellent peer review research and excellent teaching. Staff-student ratios would greatly improve, either by hiring more tenured academics or greatly reducing student numbers.
7. If, in support of 1-6 above, state funding is insufficient or deemed undesirable, then these universities should consider going private in the financial sense. This could be achieved by one-off endowments from central government, student fees and contributions from alumni on the Ivy League model of the USA.
8. These universities would be agents of social justice by ensuring fair access for talented students from underprivileged background and talented researchers who do not hail from the usual social groups. Their role would not be the creation of a self-regarding 'elite' drawn from well-off families, but a continuous stream of capable individuals from a mixture of social backgrounds.
9. To the extent that these universities offer 'service' at the local, national or international levels, it should be to and for various publics, not special interests or discrete groups with narrow or specific interests.
10. Internally, these universities would disallow any one Faculty from becoming too large or powerful. Thus, the humanities, social sciences and biophysical sciences would be roughly balanced.

This 'new deal' for a greatly slimmed down British university sector of (say) 15-20 organizations will, I realise, be enormously difficult to implement. It implies that all other British higher education institutions find their own place and purpose within a highly differentiated system of training, education and

research. The barriers to change are formidable. But this is, perhaps, a propitious time to think about structural transformation of higher education, in Britain and elsewhere. I say because of the already-mentioned funding squeeze ahead.

This is a critical juncture in the life of British universities. Swingeing reductions in central government budgets – resulting from the recent financial crisis and subsequent recession – will force them to make some tough decisions. In this light, the response of leading universities to Peter Mandelson’s recent funding cut announcement are disappointingly unimaginative. Here is Leeds University vice-chancellor Mike Arthur and director general of the Russell Group Wendy Piatt, writing to Mandelson in *The Guardian*: “... our gold standard system could be replaced with one of silver, bronze or worse ... We live in a world where ideas, innovation and entrepreneurialism are key to prosperity and wellbeing. Our universities are critical to supporting this agenda ... If politicians don’t act now, they’ll be faced with a meltdown in a sector that is vital to our national posterity” (2010: 30). Behind this seemingly reasonable defence of current state funding levels are some all too familiar ideas, namely: that central government should fund all HE institutions; that all these institutions should pursue their current agendas; and that universities exist to serve the needs of a ‘knowledge economy’. As one respondent argued, “We need a system that recognises the need for different types of equally valued higher and further education (academic and technical, theoretical and practical) ... This is not elitist but does differentiate on the basis of function and objective.” (Williams, 2010: 43; see also Jenkins, 2010).

Conclusions

This has been a chapter of two closely related halves. By setting university-based CR in a wider epistemic context, I sought to characterise our supposed ‘knowledge society’ and then, on this basis, I took issue with the way British universities are today governed. Having diagnosed current maladies I went on to suggest a new identity and role for universities, inspired by one historic vision (out of several) and the political philosophy known as civic republicanism. I am well aware that my aspirations will appear utopian to many readers, even supposing they concede the force of my arguments. But I’d prefer to be utopian than have nothing to aim for by shrugging my shoulders and accepting the *status quo* uncritically. If nothing else, I hope this chapter has given some readers pause for thought and a reason to reflect more deeply on their own practices within or towards the university.

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