

**Neo-liberalism and the new institutional politics of universities**

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**About the author**

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**Introduction: The hollowing out of university governance**

This paper describes, analyses and discusses some of the dynamic external and internal political forces currently shaping and driving changes to the ways that UK universities are organised and ruled. These changes have weakened and distorted the character of universities as public goods, and as contributors to social, economic, political and cultural progress. They have reproduced wealth inequality, and subsidised an economic system geared to the extraction of rents through the economisation of knowledge. Those forces have radically changed the characteristics of academic workers and their relations with other workers in universities, with students, and with institutions and organisations external to university structures. Most of the costs for the changes designed to support those forces are borne directly by students, and indirectly by the taxation system. Because UK universities are formally independent of the state, in the main enjoying charitable status, they are not subject to the direct privatisation through legislation that has been experienced by public utilities, parts of the National Health Service, and even schools. Instead, universities have been hollowed out through a strategy whereby, on the one hand, public funding is reduced and, on the other hand, state policy and legislation regulates their reconstruction as businesses designed to operate in and through markets. In other words, while in the main universities are formally autonomous, the context in which they operate is shaped by the state and governments (central, devolved). Although the government structure and policy architecture is different from the rest of the UK, Scottish universities have been subjected and shaped by the same forces. In fact, part of the argument of this paper is that those forces are assembled at a global level.

The paper does not follow the conventions of a report. At best, the paper is a snapshot which aims to develop its argument by focussing on some of the contemporary phenomena which are critical to the politics of university governance in a rapidly changing top-down policy driven context. It is neither the first nor last word on the matter but hopefully a contribution to an on-going discussion which may be of interest to the supporters of the Jimmy Reid Foundation constituency. After all, it’s well known that Jimmy Reid was elected as Rector of the University of Glasgow in 1971. Universities do many things but they do those things because they are institutions for the accumulation, production and distribution of knowledge, and for the formation of citizenship as part of the educational process. It is important that those characteristics are maintained and developed as well as shared as widely as possible.

The following introductory section lays out the context in which those characteristics are threatened. Most of the evidence in the paper, and the concepts that make sense of it, are derived from research on the topic of university governance produced in a broad range of academic disciplines, and more widely from research on the political economy in which universities exist and which determine their transformation. In that respect, the paper is far from comprehensive and much important research is not included simply for reasons of space, such as the on-going discussions of the plight of universities in internet distributed media.

To help understand the theoretical framework of the paper, it’s worth pointing out that a common characteristic of most critical analysis of government ideologies and policies that attempt to establish markets where they did not previously exist (or existed in limited ways subordinate to other political and social forces such as democracy and the equalisation of the distribution of wealth) is the notion of neo-liberalism. The notion of neo-liberalism has been used extensively in research which analyses and critiques the transformation of universities into businesses operating in markets. As an illustration of that point, the internet search software programme *google* claims ‘about 14,900,000 results’ for the phrase ‘neo-liberal university’. The main reason that it has been used is because neo-liberalism refers to a collection of ideas developed in Europe and the USA in the 1930s which, since the economic crisis of 1970s at least, has enjoyed a significant influence on the formation of government policy in mainly capitalist societies of one kind or another. Because of its roots in neo-classical economics, and its opposition to various forms of Marxism and Keynesianism, work and labour, and the positive economic role of the public state, are excluded from neo-liberal economic explanation in favour of markets and prices, and the policy of privatisation.

**The neo-liberalisation of universities**

The argument of this paper, and of much of the research it discusses, broadly agrees with one of the cental claimss of neo-liberal political discourse and practice. Here, it is important to understand that, as Michel Foucault explained in a series of lectures delivered in 1978-79, and published in a book with the rather misleading title *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), unlike classical and neo-classical economics, the basis of the dominance of neo-liberal influence is the idea that markets are not natural phenomena and so have to be created. That is the ‘neo’ aspect of neo-liberalism, as distinct from the classical liberal view found in economic thinkers such as Adam Smith who recognised the contribution of labour to the production of value, where markets are important for the growth of wealth, work best when left to themselves, but has to be overseen politically in order to prevent the negative effects of the pursuit of self-interest from destroying other aspects of social existence. The main neo-liberal justification for their creation is that markets provide an institutional support for individual freedom, where freedom is reduced to choice based on information provided by prices, and which provides the further justification that when and where individuals do not exercise freedom in that way then governments are entitled to form policies that encourage them to do so, and to change institutions and organisations to support compliance with those policies. Therefore, neo-liberalism is not a purely economic phenomenon as it requires authoritative political action to implement it, even if it aims to privatise and outsource states and governments, on the basis of the claim that doing so is simply acting in accordance with some sort of natural and objective logic which should be taken as ‘common sense’. That is to say, neo-liberalism provides a version of what the economy is and uses political systems in order to make it reality. On that basis markets become more than an institution to allocate resources and satisfy human happiness, questions of their efficiency in doing that are set aside. They become disciplinary mechanisms for governing populations by managing freedom. So any analysis that uses the notion of neo-liberalism maintains a dual focus on the economic and the political. Economic ends are achieved politically.

The main motivation for market creation in the university sector is the business opportunity to appropriate revenues from student fees, either paid directly or from tax revenues, and from funding for research. That motivation has created a secondary business opportunity for consultants acting as ‘change agents’ to provide information to universities that will enable them to comply with legislation and policy that requires them to act as businesses in markets, and to provide information that will enable them to compete and succeed in those markets. In fact, many of those ‘change agents’ succeed in becoming privileged and unaccountable employees of universities, in some cases elbowing their way to the status of *de facto* employer. The American industrial sociologist, Michael Burawoy (2016:941), has explained the neo-liberalisation of US universities as a consequence of the ‘ascent of the spiralists’, people who ‘spiral in from outside, develop signature projects and then hope to spiral upward and onward, leaving the university behind to spiral down’, expanding senior management and administrative bloat and blaming ‘everyone but themselves for the plight of the university’. ‘Spiralists’ are part of a global ‘executive class’, participants in an established global institutional level terrain formally outside of both government and universities which shapes and influences the direction and conduct of universities using frameworks established by organisations such as the World Bank and World Trade Organisation, and which is not accountable to either university governance or the wider public.

This version of market creation is entirely consistent with neo-liberal economics, which is not completely reducible to capitalism as it is normally understood. Value is not created. Instead, value is captured through a process that David Harvey (2004) calls ‘accumulation through dispossession’, which updates Marx’s notion of the violence of ‘primitive accumulation’ to understand it as a continuous process which seeks to overcome the periodic crises of capital accumulation. The strategy of dispossession has given rise to what Guy Standing (2017), amongst others, sees as the dominance of a rentier economy at the expense of public ownership, and of strategies in which capital is invested for economic growth, and where the surplus is the source of the contested wage return of workers. Public assets and resources are appropriated for private benefit with no advantage for general economic welfare. So-called ‘entrepreneurs’ are encouraged who invent ways to risk collective assets and wealth. It is a political process because it derives from the ability to obtain position from which to exploit value produced by others, like gangsterism and piracy. UK government legislation such as the 2017 *Higher Education Reform Act* (HERA) is one of the most recent attempts to implement policy that expands the creation of markets through dispossession by stating explicitly that the certification of Higher Education qualifications can and should be undertaken by private sector businesses. New regulatory organisations such as the Office for Students (OfS) and mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) have recently been established in order to deliver that requirement by counting and then grading characteristics of individual universities which are then ranked as proxies for value that will encourage competition. Consequently, anything that can’t be counted and measured has no value. The neo-liberal utopia is one in which those values would convert to prices fixed by the labour market function of university qualifications paid for by students.

The attraction of the market creating funding for university leaders is that to a limited extent it offsets inflation and compensates for the reduction of public funding for teaching and research. Universities can receive modest increases in income from government to assist them in complying with those processes which are designed to create proxies for market value that encourage students to regard qualifications as consumable commodities which can be used to enter high-income labour markets, and which encourage universities to shift resources away from the core activities of teaching and research in order to marketise themselves. Universities that do not play along can experience significant financial hardship, and when most of them do their continued existence is far from guaranteed because their actions institutionalise the winners and losers logic of market competition. Recent media rumours claiming that some UK universities face bankruptcy as a result of things like speculative building investments and the use of clever accounting and financial mechanisms (which encouraged the creation of debts that could not be supported by the reality of projected student enrolments and research income) are not surprising. To support marketization, the UK government made it clear that it will not bail out universities which have become economically unviable. In England, the problem has been deepened by the muddle surrounding the Government’s method of accounting for student loans, and more generally across the UK the continued mystery of the relation between qualifications and labour markets, and the puzzle about the rise of the excessive pay of academic and non-academic university managers.

For their part, universities have responded by encouraging or enforcing the voluntary, compulsory and hidden (i.e. ‘non-disclosed’) redundancy of academic staff, supported by changes in UK employment law that advantage the employer, and the closure of courses and departments. Even the OfS has revealed that between August 2017 and July 2018 8,500 UK university staff received compensation of £150m, up from £113m the previous year (WONKHE 2019). Faced with those threats, academic workers are squeezed by the responsibility of maintaining the integrity of teaching and research while at the same time complying with various demands to assist the marketization of universities, ‘dead labour’ as Bill Schwarz and Caroline Knowles (2018) have called it, leading to excessive workload, longer working hours, alienation and cynicism. That has been accompanied by widespread reports of the lowering of academic staff morale, an increase in mental and physical health problems, and a rise in more or less unconstrained bullying, harassment and intimidation. Universities have responded to those pathologies by offering academic workers corporate personal development instruction delivered through insulting fads like ‘mindfulness’ programmes and employing abusive ‘change managers’ to create individual psychological profiles to explain to workers that their problems with their working conditions are caused by their own personal failures and un-cooperative attitudes. Management surveillance of academic worker social media activity and other forms of snooping and snitching are designed into university communication strategies.

Against that background academic workers have not been entirely passive. A vote in favour of strike action by UCU members in 2018 in response to changes proposed to the USS pension scheme that would facilitate its de-risking and securitisation in order to become traded as an asset in speculative financial markets was widely supported. A characteristic of the UCU strike that should not be forgotten is that many academic workers saw it as an opportunity to protest against many of the consequences of the pro-marketisation policies which had undermined their commitment to the intrinsic benefits of teaching and research as a public good. In so doing, the collective consciousness of the strike broadened beyond the struggle for the narrow protection of economic self-interest threatened by the proposed pension changes. In fact, the strike was supported by precarious academic workers on part-time and fixed-term contracts, many of whom may never receive a pension. A symbol of that shift was the appearance of the slogan *#wearetheuniversity* on placards at pickets and on graffiti and other strike promotion media, where the *#* symbol referenced discussions of the strike on the *twitter* social media platform. Clearly, the slogan indicated a protest against the weakening and decline of the control of universities by academics, and antagonism towards those who now governed them. In doing so *#wearetheuniversity* raised the issue of power, ownership and authority within universities. Those issues have been developed by publications from <https://ussbriefs.com/>. In fact, *The University is Ours* (2018), the UCU Branch Solidarity Network handbook, identifies the domination of governance through markets as a threat to the democratic university because commodity exchange forecloses analysis, critique and reflection, and collegiality submits to corporate rule. More importantly, marketization reinforces social inequality as the wealthy are better positioned to exploit educational opportunity. The handbook discusses actions that union activists can take informed by the Goldsmiths University UCU ‘Gold Paper’ proposals for the democratisation of university governance (<https://goldsmithsucu.wordpress.com/>).

Not all UCU members were entitled to take strike action because not all UK universities subscribe to the USS pension scheme. In general, UCU members at post-92 universities could not strike because those universities do not subscribe to the USS pension scheme. Nonetheless, strikes occurred at universities across the UK despite the different policy and funding regimes of the devolved administrations. In that respect, despite the characteristics of the Scottish government’s university policies, such as the absence of tuition fees and a cap on student numbers, and the existence of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which allocates money for teaching and distributes money for research rewarded periodically by the UK wide Research Excellence Framework (REF) competition, and the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), the UCU strike over the USS proposals illustrates that Scottish universities are not shielded from changes at the UK level even though they operate outside the dominium of HERA and beyond the reach of the OfS. Indeed, although they are not required to do so, at least 5 Scottish universities currently participate in the TEF as a demonstration of market readiness. All Scottish universities are required to participate in the UK wide National Student Survey (NSS). In fact, the financial situation of Scottish universities is no better than anywhere else in the UK and is subject to the same marketization pressures. Even Audit Scotland (2016) reported recently that, in the context of a future decline in funding from teaching and research, Scottish universities that can do so are increasingly using surpluses, reserves, and loan borrowing to fund investments in their estate, a predicament that will only be eased by finding other sources of funding, with the implication that the Scottish government will not be one of those.

In that context Terry Brotherstone and Murdo Mathison (2018:663) stated:

*The underlying issues in Scotland are essentially no different from those in the rest of the UK (rUK), and the immediate problems on campuses north of the border are no less acute. Systemic underfunding since the late 1970s and particularly since the expansion of the 1990s; the threat to collegiality and academic freedom from strategies involving compulsory redundancies; deteriorating relations between lecturing and research staff and senior management, fuelled by rocketing salary differentials; and a sense that staff are excluded from meaningful decision making, these things are apparent in Scotland as elsewhere*.

Despite those similarities Brotherstone and Mathison suggest that what remains distinct about the Scottish university policy regime can contribute to a wider debate about the predicament of UK universities that would not be restricted to pragmatic solutions and would focus ‘explicit attention on the underlying trajectory of policy and its social implications’ in order to develop new thinking. One of the significant Scottish differences discussed in line with that suggestion is the 2016 *Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act* which came into effect in 2017 with a four year transition period, a watered down version of the more innovative SNP government commissioned 2012 von Prondzynski review of university governance. In essence, the Act prescribes the composition and function of Scottish university governing bodies, often called University Courts. So non-academic membership is required to be socially representative with an improved gender balance, and to include representatives of university unions, although not in a mandated delegate capacity, and students. Governing bodies are required to be transparent and to monitor the performance of the university Principal and review the effectiveness of the academic board, often called Senate or Academic Council. In doing so, Courts will balance the requirement to sustain university autonomy and a wider social responsibility. The Act has teeth. As the 2017 edition of *Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance* makes clear, failure to comply with the Act will result in the withdrawal of public funding from the SFC. That some Scottish university Principals remain reluctant and are slow-playing implementation suggests that it is a generally good thing.

However, one limitation of the Act is that in restricting itself to the formal aspects of governance it does not address the reality of the operation of power in UK universities and the ways that has been shaped by neo-liberalism in order to follow a direction towards further marketization which is at odds with the autonomy and public good commitments that it seeks to uphold. A good account of the reality of power in universities is provided by *The Democratic University: A proposal for university governance for the Common Weal*, published by The Jimmy Reid Foundation in 2013. To explain the political dominance of neo-liberalism in universities the authors identified and attacked the emergence of ‘a ‘corporate hegemony model’ (CHM) in which a professional class comprised of academic and non-academic managers in coalition with Senior Management Teams (SMTs) expects governance to be a process of ‘rubber stamping of decisions’ by the formal structures of university governance. A key observation made by the authors is that the CHM justifies itself by playing off academic freedom, the protection of academics from managers, against institutional autonomy, the protection of managers from external interference from government. Managers use the notion of academic freedom to justify their own institutional autonomy but discourage academic workers from exercising it. In doing so, SMTs, and the academics, non-academic managers, and administrators that they recruit to support them, are able to neutralise and bi-pass whatever democratic mechanisms that exist within the formal structures of university governance. Academic workers who openly oppose the policies creating those conditions and the management regimes that implement them can suffer serious penalties, including job loss, in the context of a legislative regime that has reduced and restricted employment rights and distorted the meaning of academic freedom. Those aspects of university governance cannot be captured simply by standardising its formal structure.

This paper proceeds by developing the CHM by introducing the category of the subaltern which is derived from Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony formulated in *The Prison Writings* which were written during his imprisonment under Italian fascism. For Gramsci, hegemony is a balance of coercion and consent through which the dominance or leadership of ruling groups or the ‘power bloc’ could be exercised. A key component of that process is the subaltern or non-commissioned officer who implements the orders of the power bloc on the lower ranks. In universities, subalterns are those academic workers who adopt a more positive and supportive approach to those neo-liberal policies adopted by SMTs and the political processes devised to implement them in order to position themselves advantageously in relation to the hierarchy of power through which they are secured. These contribute to an expansion of the managerial and administrative strata of universities and the appropriation of resources to support it, not least through remuneration. Following a discussion of the characteristics of the academic subaltern the paper considers how, under neo-liberalism, it has contributed to university power relations in which academic authority is undermined and displaced by non-academic corporate agents. On that basis, the paper aims to show how the academic subaltern participates in power relations external to university governance which are organised at a global level in order to create and shape markets, and which reinforces the neutralisation of democratic accountability. As an example, the paper considers the implementation of computer-based information technology in universities through which both state and private agencies extract data in order to commodify the curriculum and establish a knowledge economy based on social media business models. In conclusion, the paper discusses arguments that propose changes to university governance that will help to establish the power of academic workers over their working conditions.

**The subaltern and the corporate hegemony model**

The key argument of ‘the corporate hegemony model’ is that the democratic principle of university autonomy is used by managers as a justification of their own autonomy in managing which reduces the autonomy of academic workers and is unaccountable socially. In effect, public institutions are privatised inwardly. Often the justification given for management appropriation of university governance is that it enables it to respond to external and largely government driven regulatory change and bi-pass academic scrutiny which is characterised as slow and interested in self-preservation. In that respect the actions of UK university management can be traced back to the 1985 Jarratt report commissioned by The Committee of University Vice Chancellors and Principals. Because the report recommended the abolition of academic tenure (i.e. a job for life) most opposition to it focussed on that aspect and failed to prevent its adoption in the explosive 1988 *Education Reform Act* which established more direct state control over the whole of the education process. Less attention was paid to the fact that in seeking to ride the Thatcherite gravy train, which had famously affirmed ‘the right of managers to manage’, university managers constituted themselves as an interest group separate from the rest of the university. This enabled the development of VCs and Principals into egocratic corporate CEOs, which in turn opened the door to external influence at the top level, and delegation of power to non-academic managers and the general transformation of universities into performance-managed businesses making products for student customers. The process was deepened by the conversion of polytechnics into universities in 1992, which had generally been characterised as operating with very week academic governance structures, and the subsequent introduction of student fees. In that context, the reduction of public funding for universities and the idea that to maintain any funding universities should tie themselves to government ideologies becomes legitimate and snowballs towards the demand that universities produce a direct economic output and contribute to the dominant political economy. Academic autonomy is further undermined by encouraging curriculum development that responds to government requirements about what is and is not taught in universities, for example, by producing vocational qualifications and claiming to teach the nebulous notion of ‘employability’. Individual non-compliance provides an opportunity for managers to end academic tenure.

Confirming and reinforcing the argument made by the authors of *The Democratic University,* Michael Shattock (2017:14) recently concluded that: ‘British universities claim significant institutional autonomy as compared to universities in many other systems but perhaps this deserves reassessment in light of the way these changes in the balance of internal authority seems to have mirrored the steps by which the state has chosen to manage the system’. In other words, management autonomy enables increased government control of universities, the opposite of what is normally meant by autonomy and academic freedom. Managers are, thus, intermediaries between external political forces and the academic workforce. The authors of *The Democratic University* argue against such developments because academic input has been side-lined and neutralised and because democratic consideration both within universities and within society has been foreclosed. Senior management teams simply get their actions approved by university courts, the governing body composed of external appointees, senior managers, and top academic managers with some student and academic rank and file membership, without any consideration of the interests that are served by them. As the *The Democratic University* authors observed: ‘The overall impact of this is a lack of confidence that the ‘core values’ of these institutions are in safe hands or that their fundamental role in society is being put first by those running the institution’. Indeed, senior managers will often re-write a university’s ‘core values’ to reflect their own interests and to advertise submission to government demands through ‘mission statements’ and the like. These processes contribute to the ‘branding’ of the university as a service that conforms to government expectations about the adoption of commercial business practices, although the reality may be rather different.

*The Democratic University* makes another critical observation which helps to explain why academics appear to be acquiescent in the face of the reduction of their own autonomy. The reason is because in essence management institutes a ‘divide-and-rule’ policy by intervening in the composition of the structures of traditional academic governance in order to gain consent for the advancement of their interests. For example, the Senate, traditionally the locus of academic governance, is packed with departmental heads and deans who have been selected by senior management, often from outside the university and sometimes with no or little previous academic experience. The established procedure for selecting academic managers in a stewardship role is eliminated and patron-client relationships have emerged as the basis of consent. In turn, the senior management clients are members of courts. Consequently, the conduct of courts becomes easy to fix because, as *The Democratic University* authors argue*:* ‘the courts are then wholly reliant on recommendations and policy proposals from the SMT (there is no other administrative capacity linked to university courts which is credibly able to put counter proposals or to formulate its own strategic approaches) means that there is an extremely strong degree of control over these processes by the SMT’. In essence, that describes the power bloc of the Corporate Hegemony Model. It is strong because procedures for the democratic monitoring, measurement and assessment of the performance of the Senior Management Team do not exist. The SMT appropriates resources to monitor, measure and assess academic activity to ensure compliance with their own interests and uses disciplinary sticks to enforce it. The carrot is provided by the ability of the SMT to create further divisions within the academic workforce by allocating implementation and monitoring power to those who they judge to be loyal, with commensurate rewards for doing so above what they would normally receive on the basis of teaching and research.

One symptom of that model is, *The Democratic University* argues, ‘the increasing regularity of appointments to senior management positions from the private sector, the increasing use of private sector financialised performance monitoring and management practices and the rise of the influence of the finance directors inside universities …’. An important point to add to that is the expansion of the composition of the SMT has itself extended beyond the academic structure of universities to include top managers from the non-academic functions of a university such as marketing and public relations departments, human resources, information technology, estates and the like. Through the SMT, these functions pursue their own interests in order to obtain resources. Not only that. Through *ex officio* appointments and reporting structures non-academic managers are able to observe and monitor the conduct of academic bodies such as senate, and academic boards at school, faculty, college and departmental or divisional level. In that way non-academic managers can in-directly and directly shape academic performance in their interests while enjoying the advantages of autonomy through the absence of any mechanisms that would require their accountability to academics. Consequently, changes which enhance their resource allocation can be pushed through. Moreover, the growing power and influence of non-academic managers has extended to intervening on the academic activities of teaching and research itself, not least with respect to control over the representation of universities by marketing and PR departments.

Taken together those processes constitute the formation of the academic subaltern which exhibits the characteristics outlined in Gramsci’s original description within his theory of hegemony. In Gramsci’s view, the subaltern mediates between the dominant and the dominated, a process that goes in both directions. As Gramsci (1971:55) states: ‘Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only “permanent” victory breaks their subordination, and not that immediately. In reality, even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves …’. Subaltern activity is necessarily ‘fragmented and episodic’ as they ‘are not unified and cannot unite’. Subaltern groups attempt to influence the programmes of hegemonic formations ‘in order to press claims of their own’ which is in turn related to ‘the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them’. Subaltern claims are of a partial and limited character, their autonomy existing within ‘the old framework’ but which may also demonstrate a ‘spirit of cleavage’ (Gramsci 1971:52-55). In other words, although subalterns may seek a degree of autonomy, it is always compromised and split between their dominance over the lower ranks and their domination by and subordination to the hierarchy.

To understand the sociology of the academic subaltern, it’s worth considering William Keenan’s research, published as long ago as 2000, which was based on interviews with 17 UK academics working in social science departments about their memories of their involvement in the implementation of information and communication technologies in the period between 1987 and 1996. That is, before the use of computers in universities was boosted by the emergence of the internet, email and graphic user interfaces. The interviewees recalled how their interest in computerisation lead them to occupy the implementation roles that university management created for the purpose of digitalising the university. Often those interests stemmed from a genuine enthusiasm for what was seen as the utopian potential of the ‘knowledge economy’ that was common at the time. What Keenan called ‘techno-powerbrokers’ were able to exert power and influence over their colleagues backed up by management support. The interviewees recognised the advantages that gave them in terms of things like career progression. One of them recalled how: ‘I was in a bit of a rut research-wise and becoming the local techno-supremo was a kind of a Godsend … For a time I felt I had real power. IT was my way into the departmental inner circle … More money followed the IT responsibility. More money, more clout … The bubble soon burst’ (Keenan 2000: 349-350). As computers became ubiquitous and routine the need for academic evangelists declined, the victims of their own success. Further, new policy agendas and strategies displaced the IT emphasis and the costs of computer plant lowered, distancing techno-power brokers from the university pecking order and subsuming expenditure within ordinary budgets.

Of course, subsequent waves of ‘knowledge economy’ boosterism, for example, those associated with the automation of teaching, may have revived the status of computer enthusiasts. However, Keenan’s research shows that the position of the academic subaltern is unstable in relation to changing policy directions, and is always split between an emphasis on bureaucratic functionality, on the one hand, and the need to negotiate through academic collegiality and transparent decision making on the other. Those characteristics have accelerated with the proliferation of projects and initiatives which universities are expected to adopt and implement, not least those that support marketization. Because of what Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2015) have called ‘fast policy’, managers rely on circumventing the accountability processes of formal university governance structures which may slow down or even prevent adoption by recruiting likely subalterns as personal clients. In that way, power is deployed through selective dispersal. As with any organisation characterised by domineering and secretive structures of power, taboos quickly surround discussion of the reality. Moreover, because many of the policies and initiatives are not thought through and contradict each other, subalterns are expected to sort out the problems arising from that which leads to competitive zero-sum games in turf-wars over resources to deliver, the invention of ways of non-completion in order to preserve claims on resources, and tactical abandonment in order to attach to new initiatives before the ‘bubble bursts’. In short, the academic subaltern proliferates in an environment that, to use By and his co-authors’ (2008:21) robust summary of the effects of audit and managerialism;

*encourages opportunistic behaviour such as cronyism, rent-seeking and the rise of organizational psychopaths. This development will arguably not only lead to a waste of resources, change for the sake of change, further centralization, formalization and bureaucratization but, also, to a disheartened and exploited workforce, and political and short-term decision making*.

The ‘organizational psychopath’ can be defined as those individuals ‘with no conscience … who are willing to lie and are able to present an extrovert … charming façade in order to gain managerial promotion via a ruthlessly opportunistic and manipulative approach to career advancement’ (Boddy, 2006: 1462). In fact, the ability to create uncertainty in order to take advantage of opportunities is a strategic asset with which subalterns invent solutions in search of problems.

Tragically, this same logic of the academic subaltern is not confined to support for initiatives that stem directly from the neo-liberal project of marketization. It also applies to those who seek to advance socially progressive initiatives insofar as those are adopted by universities in response to external pressures, such as gender equality, widening access, ‘the student experience’, environmental responsibility, as well as innovations in teaching and the relevance of research, because they will also compete for resource and supporters, and because they may also be dropped, or instrumentalised and subordinated to university marketing strategies. In fact, academic autonomy has been eliminated to the extent that any non-routine activity is only permitted if it can be demonstrated that it ‘aligns’ or ‘articulates’ with the university mission, plan, strategy etc. Aside from the ‘organisational psychopath’, the effects of those logics are often detrimental to the subjective well-being of subalterns in that they attempt to maintain managerial and bureaucratic attitudes in order to act, and academic attitudes in order for those actions to be legitimate and to fit with their own understandings of their purpose and self-worth. Monica Franco-Santos and her co-authors (2017) attribute those contradictory subjective experiences to the displacement of governance through collegiality by governance through control. The former emphasised trust and stewardship, the latter emphasises suspicion and observation. In turn, the emphasis on controlling and ‘being in control’ blurs the distinction between academic and managerial roles, to the advantage of the latter. An important effect of that process is that it is not really useful to make a distinction between subaltern and non-subaltern and to try and turn that into some sort of political opposition. Because of the managerial strategy of the dispersal of power, and the tactic of turning the ordinary differences and disagreements which are intrinsic to the development of knowledge into managerialist divisions, many academic workers can find themselves in subaltern positions, often unwittingly.

By the same token, it would not be accurate to categorise all those developments as the negative effects of the growth of administration and bureaucracy, and neither would it be justifiable to pose collegiality as an intrinsically good thing against that. Collegiality can also provide a smokescreen for the abuse of professional power and encourage a conservative conformity. Kate Nash (2018) has recently argued that a distinction can be made between bureaucracy which supports education, and that which undermines it by supporting marketization. The argument from that distinction is that an ethos of bureaucratic impartiality is required to police professional misconduct and maintain principles of equal treatment against discrimination and prejudice in order to uphold academic values, and to uphold reasonable expectations regarding academic staff performance. Nash believes that those aspects of bureaucracy can help to mitigate against marketization, although that would only happen if educational bureaucracy had an ethos of anti-marketisation written into it. In any event, Nash concedes that hyperactive neo-liberalism has weakened the distinction between educational and marketing bureaucracy, creating a ‘grey area’. Much marketing bureaucracy is increasingly and routinely undertaken by academics themselves. Examples range from the promotion of research and teaching, to writing ‘business plans’ for new courses and research projects. The requirements of marketization have increased the time spent on those sorts of activities within the academic workload (‘dead labour’). Moreover, if one considers the ability of managers to get round formal structures of academic governance, which tends to be where the education supporting bureaucracy is located and organised, and the recruitment of subalterns to projects and initiatives, then the blurring of the lines with marketing bureaucracy tends to the advantage of the latter. Academics working in Spanish speaking societies have coined a word to categorise those hybrid academics who mostly undertake managerial and administrative functions: *Los acadestrativos*. In other words, marketing, which in Nash’s argument is a metaphor for the neo-liberalisation of universities, acts within the structures of educational bureaucracy and advances its interests through that, and in doing so increases its power over educational bureaucracy and the academics and administrators who collaborate to maintain it, and accumulates resources to do that.

A literal illustration of that process is provided by Maria Elken and her co-authors’ (2018) report from their study of the growth of marketing and communication departments in Nordic and Baltic universities which shows that those bureaucracies are not just concerned with producing a brand and promoting the product. Marketing and communication has elbowed itself into close organisational relations with university leadership, most likely through managing upwards, where it exercises the strategic function of internal coordination. Largely autonomous and unaccountable, university communication is constrained by what marketing and communication can do, which is often little more than mimicking what other universities are understood to have done in order to institutionalise a regime of ‘ceremonial conformity’ in order to represent the university to itself. In securing their position in corporate turf wars, marketing and communication personnel are able to rely on the support of networks in other universities and the public relations and advertising industry more widely for advice and support for ways of making their interests appear identical to the image of the university that they have constructed, while at the same time shaping the interests of the university through committee membership and corridor work, developing ‘action plans’ for other units and departments, establishing systems for data collection, and deciding performance indicators. Through such means marketing and communication is able to control the internal representational space of the university and discipline academic conduct to conform to it. In other words, the inner reality is moulded to fit with an entirely manufactured outward appearance. As Elken *et al.* (2018:12) dryly conclude: ‘the weight given to the amount of time and energy devoted to internal coordination stand in contrast to the external functions one would expect dominated the agenda of these departments … This might imply quite different functions of communication departments in universities than in other organizations engaging in corporate communication activities’ (12). Because universities receive no income for these policing activities, they are paid for from teaching and research revenue. It is in their interests to get as much of that as they can, often through claims that their activities are indispensable to the success of the university which are not possible to verify. The distance and disparity between what is communicated and what actually happens increases and alternative critical accounts are shut down quickly and oppositional voices punished. In those conditions the academic values of teaching and research are undermined by the political ambitions of corporate overreach.

**The corporate politics of the university**

One pernicious example that illustrates corporate overreach in an alarming and, at the same time, amusing way is the case of Craig Brandist, professor of cultural theory and intellectual history at the University of Sheffield. Brandist’s specialism is Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, a Russian Soviet cultural theorist who became active in the period following the 1917 revolution. In 2014, he wrote an article published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) critical of university management and comparing it to Stalinism. Reading the archives of Soviet higher education institutions from the 1920s, Brandist thought that their style could easily be translated into the bureaucratic documents required by UK universities and funders. As an experiment Brandist did exactly that and the university bureaucrats accepted the forms. Brandist’s point was that although UK academics are not subject to the same level of censorship and state repression, they do experience parallels with the Soviet system; institutional competition, subordination to metrics, endless targets, an emphasis on economic benefit and social cohesion, the use of performance management, and the repetition of government slogans to get support. In fact, UK academics are trained to tick those boxes. Centralised decision making and the power of ‘craven functionaries’ imposes productivity targets and Stakhanovites are rewarded. Academics are even routinely required to submit five year research plans. As evidence for the parallel, Brandist gave the example of the Director of Human Resources at Sheffield who had ordered academics to ‘excel’ or ‘leave the organisation’.

Then, in 2016, Brandist wrote another article for the THES which reported that a few days after publication of the first one he had received a formal letter from Human Resources ‘suggesting that I should desist from publishing such material and instead raise concerns internally’. As Brandist comments: ‘The irony was lost on HR, but these people generally don’t do irony’. HR’s response to the letter recalls *The Joke*, Milan Kundera’s 1967 novel about an academic who was expelled from his university and the Czechoslovakian Communist Party and banished to work in the mines as punishment for sending a postcard to his girlfriend on which he had written, ‘Optimism is the opium of mankind! A healthy spirit stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!’ Brandist had to enlist the support of UCU officials to prevent action being taken against him. That would probably not have been hard labour, but more likely dismissal after a disciplinary procedure in which the university will be judge, prosecution, jury and sole witness, although to his credit Sheffield’s Vice Chancellor apologised personally for HR’s action. Notoriously, UK universities will pay a former academic worker who takes the employer to an Employment Tribunal for unfair or constructive dismissal what the award is expected to be on the day that the case is scheduled to be heard in return for signing a gagging clause, or include all that in a ‘voluntary severance’ or ‘resignation’ contract, thus avoiding wider scrutiny and negative publicity. The scandal is indicative of the fact that throughout UK universities the corporate brand will override academic freedom, and those who create and identify with the brand feel entitled to police it against academic criticism.

For Brandist, the Soviet parallel was not simply the growth and dominance of petty officials imposing compliance to metrics, audit and performance management, but the similarity with the tactics academics employ to survive within the regime. These include *blat*, the Russian word for ingratiation with superiors, *krugovaia porukha*, mutual dissembling to defend against scrutiny, *pripiska*, creating the impression that plans have been implemented, and *pokasukha*, putting on a show to deflect attention from failure (*ochkovtiratel’stvo*). Petty managers prosecute turf wars, using tactical deference and obsequiousness to form alliances, inflating claims of success to advance position and pleading poverty in order to appropriate resources and deliver the outcomes that the SMT desires. Dissenting tendencies are bullied and isolated and discipline is maintained through networks of surveillance in order to single out the ‘unreliable, unstable and degenerate elements’, as Stalin would have put it. Brandist’s point is that universities are weakened by these forms of conduct and the corporate power that encourages them. Research in Australian universities by Senia Kalfa and colleagues (2017) confirms the ordinary everyday experience of compliance and resistance as a normal component of academic practice. Of course, that is hardly visible to an outside observer except in moments of crisis when the cracks appear. Even then, it is difficult to understand why problems have occurred as governments continue to fund universities. That is because the image of universities created by PR and communication does not correspond to the reality.

In a subsequent research paper, Brandist (2017) proposed that universities appear as a ‘palimpsest’, the term used by archivists to describe texts and documents that have been written over or erased, but where the original text is still visible. Brandist uses it as a metaphor to describe how the original academic value of the university is still visible even though it has been overwritten by bureaucracy, and more recently by corporate commerce. It is the traces of academic value that universities highlight in order to establish their value and credibility as brands. The obvious and crude example are the coats of arms and Latin phrases that universities use to badge themselves, and the medieval costumes or ‘gowns’ academics are obliged wear at official events. Others are the photographs of happy clean-cut and smiling students with the precise multi-cultural composition used to advertise universities in their promotional brochures, perhaps holding test-tubes or huddled around a computer. Those sorts of thing confer academic legitimacy on the bureaucratic and commercial behaviours that are in the main incompatible with academic values. Hence, under the expansion of management ‘disingenuous appeals to the image of a long-vanished collegiality, in which university staff exerted an unusual amount of control over their activities, are very much akin to the dominant Soviet ideology of the ‘comradely’ practices of the ‘socialist’ economy. In each case the structures of power over resources and people are deliberately obscured, even though they remain very real and actively experienced’ (Brandist 2017:599).

The combination of the image of academic collegiality and Soviet-style survival strategies functions in games of compliance with government policies that direct university activities in return for funding. A good example of that is provided by a critical analysis of the ways in which universities have sought to attract policy driven funding while at the same time changing the criteria to justify it to advance their own particular interests. The research of Lockett *et al.* (2014) shows how the aim of successive UK governments since the 1980s of making universities contribute to economic success was subverted by the ability of universities to shape the measurement techniques that would otherwise demonstrate their contribution to economic growth. In other words, the counting of objective hard facts that would prove the economic contributions of universities, or not as the case may be, was shaped by the interests of university managers and a strata of cadres that was created in order to seek the advantages of government policy, and which was funded by the money that government provided in order to make the policy work. Rather than confront governments head on by using university research that demonstrated that business need for university research was lukewarm, and that companies that universities had established performed badly, universities determined the ways that evidence was gathered by deciding what got measured. In so doing, they maintained the legitimacy of government policy in exchange for funding of activities in line with the policy while at the same time obscuring the fact that the results were unimpressive in relation to government expectations.

Universities were able to do that because governments had accepted that the so-called ‘technology transfer’ polices that had been introduced in the 1990s (which supported government proposals to solve the problems of post-industrial society by the creation of a ‘knowledge economy’, had failed in the sense that the financial investment allocated to support them made minimal or zero aggregate returns. In order to continue the policy and the funding that came with it governments and universities switched to the fuzzier idea of ‘knowledge transfer’. This was supposed to mean the acquisition by businesses of the knowledge produced by universities in support of their enterprises. In practice, universities demonstrated the success of knowledge exchange by counting the number of policy funded activities that they were involved in, rather than by the outputs or economic value created by those activities. As these activities received funding from government, then it was in the universities’ interest to increase their number as it showed that the financial investment supporting the policy was succeeding.

Critics often point out that such policies privatise knowledge and destroy the intellectual commons. That would be true if they were successful but, on the whole, they are not. Instead, academics are commanded to produce knowledge that can be privatised irrespective of whether it actually happens. The resource inefficiency should be obvious, as should the comparison with Soviet industrial regimes. The measures that were used to demonstrate the success of the policy were ‘robust’ in the sense that they could be understood in ways that aligned with the different interest groups that sought to obtain advantage from it. Consequently, ‘actors were able to provide stakeholders with a far greater flexibility with respect to how to interpret the performance of universities’ knowledge transfer activities’ (Lockett *el al.* 2014:12). By and large, academics engaged in teaching and research do not benefit from the government income attached to ‘knowledge transfer’ policies. At the same time, teaching and research is elbowed out in order to create the space for ‘knowledge transfer’ and to allocate the resources to pursue it. That space is occupied by cadres of policy free-riders. Their position is secure insofar as governments continue to insist that universities are required to demonstrate a direct economic impact. Of course, criticising government policy on this matter does not mean that universities should not contribute to economic progress. Many academic workers do that through teaching and research and would do it irrespective of government policy. The point is that if government policy is to be formulated to support the economic contribution of universities it would be better if it was informed by what academic workers actually do. Instead, governments have imposed one size fits all formulas with narrow theories about how economies do and should work which encourages universities to chase the evidence that policies require and mobilise resources to create the impression that it is what they are doing. That approach is reinforced by the UK government’s creation of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), an auditing mechanism designed to create competitive university league tables in order to allocate resource. It is likely that academic subalterns will work out quite quickly how to ‘game’ it.

However, the idea of universities as commercial providers of their products, and their failure to do that, is only one side of the story of neo-liberal marketization. The other side is the organisation of markets in which universities purchase products. These phenomena do not arise spontaneously. The actions and the language used to describe and justify them are planned and organised. The key characteristic of these markets is that they are driven and supported by state and government policy which creates conditions in which distinctions between government, academic and commercial actors are blurred, rules about the purchaser-provider split that have been imposed on public sector governance in order to stimulate marketisation are subverted, and the boundaries of university structures and bureaucracies become porous. Above all, these markets are organised at the global level in what Kerstin Sahlin and her Swedish and German co-authors (2015) call, in the title of their research paper: ‘The ‘Milky Way’ of intermediary organisations: a transnational field of university governance’. In Europe, the Anglophone territories, Asia, South America, Africa and Russia there is a remarkable similarity in the manner in which universities have become market focussed and have reorganised their structures, finances and self-representation to support that approach. Sellers in these emerging, dynamic and growing markets tailor their products to solve the problems of responding to policy developments and target the core activities of the university and its management. Supported by corporate overreach, these markets subordinate academic governance and educational bureaucracy and transform them to meet their demands through collaboration.

**Infrastructures of market creation**

As Sahlin *et al.* (2015:408) have observed: ‘a growing number of transnational intermediary organisations form important arenas for actors from different countries that compare and assess universities, and form as well as translate ideas for how to manage universities and measure university performance’. These actors occupy a position between those who govern and those who are governed and are, therefore, outside of state and university governance structures. In fact, liberalisation of those structures is often a requirement built into international trade agreements. As well as shaping the restructuring of universities, global intermediaries also seek to influence the content of teaching and the direction of research. James Mittelman (2016) points out that under the influence of the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation, and particularly through their development programmes, an emphasis on problem-solving rather than curiosity-driven and critical knowledge is encouraged. In turn, those organisations attempt to determine the problems to be solved and select the solutions which are acceptable. In Europe, the Bologna process, established in 1999, sought to establish global higher education competition and student ‘employability’. Through that process central university management has been strengthened, ‘best practices’ have been copied, and quality assurance harmonised. In turn, to comply with those requirements universities employ more administrators and managers to codify performance, incentivise bandwagoning and coerce acceptance. The aim of these actors is to create problems and provide solutions through agenda setting, rule formation, and performance evaluation, and in doing so they interact to share information and understanding in order to build capacity, advance their interests, spread common beliefs, secure position, and above all earn fees and capture value from revenue streams. In the development of these transnational governance formations the line between public and private is blurred and, hence, the scope of democratic oversight and control is shrunk. The common currency is the system of university rankings where position is a proxy of value.

In a study of that phenomenon Janja Konljenovic (2018) observed interactions in two of the actual physical spaces of exchange, the Association of International Educators, held in San Diego, California, in 2014, and the European Association for International Education, held in Prague in 2014. In effect, these events are trade shows where a process of exogenous privatisation takes place, and which is reinforced by university administrators learning about ‘practices and values from the private sector’ (Konljenovic 2018:2). For their part, sellers work out how to align their products with what university administrators tell them they want and offer reassurances of compatibility with academic values. Products are pitched through seminars and training sessions in order to persuade administrators of their necessity. A common tactic is to initially offer a service for free in a prototype or ‘beta’ version and then monetise it though improvements and support. Once universities buy into these services, it can be quite difficult to back out, especially when sellers cultivate informal and personal relationships and ‘positive emotional connections’ which entangle social and economic relationships. Despite that touchy-feely dimension, Konljenovic reports from interviews with sellers complaints about the slow decision-making speed of universities, the obstruction of democratic accountability, and decentralised university administration. Their response is to offer products that will provide solutions to those problems, thus, creating a base within universities from which to expand, and to recruit a tier of managers and administrators to support them. In effect, the speed of business dominates the speed of the university.

**The future now: Darkness at noon**

One way that the homogenisation of content and the oligopolisation of markets is likely to develop will be through the penetration of computer software and its distribution through the internet into the university economy. Mittelman (2016) sees that as the intention of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), internet distributed correspondence courses developed and promoted by firms such as Cousera, Udacity and edX which standardise academic content and the ways that it is taught, learnt and assessed, thereby, reducing the academic labour force and appropriating the costs of delivery as student fees are transformed into subscriptions and payments for qualifications. A consequence of their advantages of scale and scope will be the reduction of the number of universities, although the evidence indicates that despite high volume registrations, drop-out rates are almost as high and completion rates minimal. In turn, the scientific infrastructure of knowledge will be dismantled and reduced to a narrow exchange function. Curiosity, discovery and critique will become sidelined except in cases which respond to the requirements of the system. Students will become isolated and atomised, supported by intermittent contact with academic workers reduced to the role of instructors. The educational experience will become fragmented, incoherent and ‘unbundled’. Teaching and research will stagnate. MOOCs will reinforce social inequality creating a distinction between ‘bricks for the rich, clicks for the poor’ in South African researcher Laura Czerniewicz’s (2018) phrase.

There are four dimensions to this process. First, the project of turning every aspect of the university into data which, in this case, means numbers that can be counted and measured in order to compare, and the erasure of anything that cannot. Second, the process of turning data into commodities, which in this case means the creation of a secondary market in software and hardware infrastructures that are able to create, collect, distribute and represent data, as well as the standardisation of data, including the content of teaching itself, in order to be exchanged for student fees, and to create competition between universities to attract them. Third, the process creates further pressure on academic workers to subordinate academic values to the production of ‘good data’ as both lecturers and students are compared to standardised performance criteria which they have not determined. Fourth, insofar as academic workers and students are required to input data continuously, then it is possible for ‘data analytics’ firms to track real-time conformity to performance criteria, from which it is a quick and easy step to produce longitudinal data as a basis for speculative investment and dis-investment. Hence, the passage from data-fication to financialisation of universities is inevitable.

Data-fication is not confined to hard data. Data analytics technology provides the ability to drill down to popular social media platforms such as facebook, twitter and Instagram. Hence, as universities encourage students to link their participation in those platforms to their educational experiences, it is relatively straightforward for firms to count and evaluate the proxies for sentiment programmed into them, which will in turn determine the curriculum and syllabus, as well as standards of content delivery and student assessment. Dijck and Poell (2018:581) put the consequences bluntly: ‘These emerging digital policy instruments transfer the assessment of didactic and pedagogical values from teachers and classrooms to (commercial) online platforms deploying real-time and predictive analytics techniques’. Education is reduced to learning, and learning is narrowed to learning to fit into the data performance, and assessment of that learning is reduced to continuous surveillance and behaviour monitoring. A student who takes 5 seconds to answer an online question correctly will be judged to be better than one who takes 5.2 seconds. A student that takes 2 seconds will be failed by an algorithm on the assumption that the answer was randomly guessed. Only knowledge that can reduced to an online test will count as knowledge, although computer programmes developed to mark essays are not far off and programmes to write them are not much further behind.

In short, academic workers and students will be working for private data firms and digital platforms. The business models developed by data analytics and learning platform firms are based on revenue sharing, with a rising price scale for additional services such as assessment, certification and data storage, often up to 80% of university fee income. In addition to up-front fees, universities and students provide data for free, including curriculum content. Because these firms are not exclusively contracted they can collect, process and represent data from multiple universities and sell it to other firms. In short, universities will pay rents to private firms for the use of content that academic workers have created. Oddly, the consequence of that is not to differentiate universities as commodities, in line with the market characteristics of post-industrial capitalism, but to homogenise the global field of higher education. To take an idea from Adorno and Horkheimer’s classic assessment of the culture industry (1979 [1944]), any differences are internal to and a requirement of the system, in the same way as Yale locks are different; they are still Yale locks. The monotonous and meaningless talk of ‘excellence’ found throughout universities, a throwback to one of the management guru fads of the 1980s ridiculed in the *Bill and Ted* and *Wayne’s World* films, is a symptom of that. In short, transnational regulation creates the space for monopolies and oligopolies to emerge, thus undermining the ethos of competition and consumer choice which has provided the ethical justification for neo-liberal marketization in the first place.

Consequently, capitalism continues to follow its historical trajectory towards the elimination of markets through the creation of monopolies and oligopolies in order to benefit from economic rents. Even the resolutely neo-liberal *The Economist* regularly complains about this phenomena, reproduced by the so-called digital economy, even if it is not interested in grasping the implications of the contradictions that it identifies (e.g. ‘The next capitalist revolution’, *The Economist* 17 November 2018). Instead, *The Economist* recommends further liberalisation in order to encourage ‘disruptive innovation’, another term for what the political economist, Joseph Schumpeter, called ‘creative destruction’. On the whole, those processes do not create new value but simply redistribute common wealth to the private sector. The marketization of universities will follow the same trajectory as they are dismantled and redistributed to the private sector. A driver of that process is their domination by developments in computer software and hardware linked by the internet in which universities are ‘unbundled’ and ‘rebundled’, creating the conditions for the emergence of monopolistic ‘mega universities’ which are shells for what Nick Srnicek (2017) has called ‘platform capitalism’ in which computers combine with the absorption of surplus capital through speculative financial markets in order to provide students with certified instruction for labour market entry. Hence, the neo-liberal panacea of markets, competition and choice is simply a justification for further and deeper privatisation. That process accelerates the subversion of university governance by the demands of monopoly firms and detaches the rules regulating academic governance from the aims of knowledge production. It is authoritative because the boundary between the state and private economic actors has itself become porous. That has happened because the same fee earning ‘change agents’ that provide support for marketization to universities are also at the same time providing support to states and governments in order to impose marketization and frame the rules and processes through which that occurs. A key strategy of that process, borrowed from the business models of social media and internet based entertainment distribution platforms, is the predatory ‘unbundling’ and ‘rebundling’ of the university through which value is appropriated.

**Unbundling university governance and rebundling private authority**

Unbundling and rebundling are probably familiar to anyone who has a contract with a mobile phone or digital media provider. A service or commodity is broken down into smaller component parts to enable a range of prices or tariffs for different combinations. Usually consumers are puzzled about what they are actually paying for as comparisons between different tariffs are designed to be difficult to establish, and are often pestered by firms to sign up to different and more expensive bundles. According to Nick Lewis and Cris Shore (2018), the application of that technique is designed to prepare universities for privatization in line with government policies as it creates the conditions for outsourcing profitable parts of education, intensive management of particular components, and tightly specifiable contractual relations with both employees and students-as-customers. As Lewis and Shore explain (2018:2):

*The call to ‘unbundle’ is closely related to well-established neo-liberalising processes in higher education, but portends a new and distinctive transformational project. At stake are the assets and economic rents bound up in the right to confer degrees and in the interdependencies, value chains and social synergies of public universities – research based teaching, campus lives, integrated mass and elite education, and co-constitutive social and individual educational values. Unbundling is a strategy for breaking up universities and marketing their services and resources in ways that supposedly release their hitherto untapped profit making potential. The challenge is more fundamental than those to do with the spread of new managerialism, entrepreneurialism, and commercialisation that have incrementally transformed life within existing universities, struggles that have been waged and largely lost. What is at stake now is a further round of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2004). Disaggregating, outsourcing and privatising the university’s assets and services is a strategy for enabling new providers and often predatory financial interests to enter the higher education market.*

The techniques developed by digital firms to enter universities and appropriate revenue are part of a wider historical process of privatisation of public assets. That process has also driven the effective privatisation of the authority of decision-making and the outsourcing of the governance of power and rule at state level, and so it is not surprising that universities have been caught in the slipstream. Governance is characterised by porous private/public relations and the creation of policy making networks that include think-tanks and big management consultant oligopolies such as KPMG and Deloitte. A striking characteristic of that process is the ‘revolving door’ between the private and public sectors of what Aeron Davis has called ‘reckless opportunists’ (2018) skilled in the arts of what James Ball and Andrew Greenway call ‘bluffocracy’ (2018).

A glaring example of that is the career of Sir Michael Barber, formerly a civil servant in the ‘new’ Labour government who, in 2011, got a job as the Chief Education Advisor for Pearson, a global textbook publisher and previously part owner of *The Economist*, and subsequently, in 2018, became Chair of the newly created Office for Students which replaced the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Barber is infamous for inventing the ‘deliverology’ management strategy, and authoring reports on education for McKinsey. According to Ben Williamson (2018c), Sir Michael Barber ‘physically embodies a meeting-point between agencies, rendering porous the boundaries between government agency, consultancy and private company’. The aim of Barber is to push through the unbundling of the university sector and individual universities and support private firms to re-bundle it, in much the same way that public utilities were chopped up by the privatisation policies of the 1980s and 1990s, but this time using business models developed by internet-based social and entertainment media platforms. To support those aims, the then UKHE minister Sam Gyimah used *twitter* to announce that he was ‘officially launching a competition for tech companies to take graduate data & create a MoneySuperMarket for students, giving them real power to make the right choices’, a reference to the price comparison website MoneySuperMarket.com. Advocates are encouraged by young people’s adoption of social media fads and the use of apps, although less attention is paid to the general reluctance to actually pay for any of it, and to the strategies used to rig the metrics in order to obtain advertising revenue that subsidises it.

Barber’s tactics for insinuating private interests into government strategy are illustrated by his contribution to the transformation of Pearson from a producer of textbooks to an education provider. According to Anna Hogan and her co-authors (2016), a key component of Pearson’s strategy to create and be at the centre of a ‘global policy consensus’ in education on the use of data and marketization was the production and distribution of *The Learning Curve* (*TLC*, a deliberate pun on the warm and fuzzy phrase ‘tender loving care’), a 50 page report, website and database, developed in conjunction with the Economist Intelligence Unit. The product was designed to identify and simplify policy problems and provide ‘what works’ solutions based on Pearson’s commercial interests in exploiting business opportunities. To achieve that all Pearson did was number crunch and re-package publicly available data provided by organisations like the OECD and UNESCO. Even so, Pearson was unable to find any significant correlations in the data beyond the well-known observation that in general education is a positive thing for labour productivity, as well as other important aspects of human existence. In Hogan *et al.’s* (2016:250) view: ‘Indeed, when reading the report there seems to be a marked shift from the strong beginning claims that *TLC* is an important tool for assisting policy-makers to quantify the link between knowledge and skills and economic competitiveness, and the realisation that ‘the most striking result for correlations is the overall paucity of clear linkages’’.

However, there are three reasons why it would be wrong to conclude that Pearson’s bluff failed. First, in identifying that education is a ‘black box’ in which it is difficult to predict or quantify a relation between inputs and outputs, Pearson is able to create a problem and provide a solution; namely, more data to be provided by universities and processed by Pearson’s own Center for Digital Data, Analytics and Adaptive Learning. Second, Pearson’s appropriation of public data, combined with its corporate resources and textbook production reputation, enables it to create the impression that it is a legitimate actor in policy formulation and implementation. Third: ‘The production of *TLC* as a policy document (by Pearson’s own account) was not made possible by the correlations that they sought (or failed to find), but by the recruitment of agents with power and capacity in the global education field’ (Hogan *et al.* 2016:256). Through those successes, Pearson is positioned to get its foot in the doors of universities, extract data, and sell it back to them. Although it’s not the only player in the game, Pearson’s strategy has been remarkably successful in dissolving the distinction between commerce, government and universities. Ben Williamson (2018b) has reported extensively and intensively on those developments in the creation of a data-driven edu-business market, formalised by the decision in June 2018 of the Office for Students to share its data with Pearson, HMRC, the Student Loans Company, and the Competition and Market Authority. Pearson itself runs Pearson College in London providing degrees validated by Kent and Bradford universities, and listed on the FTSE 100, and online degrees for UK and US universities, and contracts with various firms in other industrial sectors to deliver products that provide students with ‘skills for the future’. Pearson creates the market and sets the rules.

The production and commercialisation of educational data is cemented into the UK government HE policy and the labyrinth of departments and agencies created to support them. Williamson (2018a,b) reports how the market creation function of the OfS is supported by the data collection work of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, established in 1993), the monitoring of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and the digital infrastructure of the Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) (2018a,d). These agencies are direct effects of UK parliamentary legislation and policies formulated by The Department of Business Innovation and Skills (subsequently renamed The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) with deliberately misleading Orwellian names such as Students at the Heart of the System (2011) and Success as a Knowledge Economy (2016), supported by government mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey, projects such as the Higher Education Data and Information Improvement Programme (2013) and Data Futures (2016), and various consultancies and think-tanks seeking to latch onto the revenue streams available to them, such as KPMG and Deloitte (Williamson 2018a). UK parliamentary legislation to support that process was written into the 2017 *Higher Education Research Act*.

Combined, the work of these agencies flattens knowledge into the universal equivalent of data which functions as a proxy for value, and turns knowledge and the processes through which it is produced and acquired into a thing or object rather than an active relation. Knowledge will be determined and limited by what can be digitalised. In fact, most of these developments will be provided by private firms seeking to stretch the value of computer software and infrastructure that has been developed in the so-called ‘knowledge economy’ as returns on the investments that financed them tend to zero. Students will be required to self-monitor their activities and their feelings about them by using software modelled on health and fitness apps. In doing so, students will produce data for firms to transform into economic value without getting paid. As academics and students are forced to use these systems, then the predictions made by their owners of their inevitability and necessity become true. Like Spotify, governments and universities have adopted a ‘fake it till you make it’ strategy based on a financial market in which future growth expectations are tradeable assets (Vonderau, 2017). In effect, the data-fication of HE is an opportunity to obtain more intellectual property rents.

As can be expected, the use of data to discipline performance is complimented by the aim to digitalise educational content in order to create a student experience dominated by computer screens in which studying will be replaced by rote learning. The push accelerating policies which aim to replace the typical university student experience of study through lectures, seminars, laboratories, libraries, field trips and the like with algorithm regulated screen learning appears to be oblivious to moral panics around the effects of the time children and adolescents spend on computers on their health and intellectual development. The idea that university education can simply piggy-back on that trend is stupid, especially as social media is itself subject to abrupt fashion changes and can only sustain itself economically through advertising. Above all, it is thumpingly condescending to assume that screen-based education is what students want just because they spend a lot of time on social media, computer games and the internet. Evidence that students do not want it is provided by the news item in the *New York Post* (10 November 2018) which reported that high-school pupils at the Secondary School for Journalism in Park Slope, Brooklyn, had walked out and demonstrated in protest at receiving tuition through the Facebook owned ‘Summit Learning’ computer software. Pupils complained that ‘it is annoying to just sit there staring at one screen for so long’ and ‘you have to teach yourself’. To relieve the tedium pupils played computer games and pasted questions into *google* for the answers. One pupil objected that ‘the whole day, all we do is sit there’. Far from providing ‘personalised learning’ and ‘self-direction’ pupils know that computer-based learning is ‘just another brick in the wall’ that enforces passivity. That rejection of the use of computers in teaching is likely to progress to opposition with the realisation that the ‘task specific’ and ‘job ready’ instruction provided by platform education will be worthless in labour markets characterised by dynamic change in all but the most mundane and routine jobs, which are themselves destined to be eliminated through automation. Tying education to reassurances of economic stability is an example of what the North American literary theorist, Lauren Berlant (2011), calls ‘cruel optimism’.

**Redistribution, resistance and the ownership of academic capital**

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that academic workers face both internal and external threats, as well as the threat to the maintenance of the boundaries between the university and its external environment caused by a rapidly changing policy context, which in turn is an outcome of a complex set of political and economic relations. These threats are the drivers which shape the reality of university governance, the ways in which an organisation realises its purpose or reason for existence, which differs from the official image of a formal structure established by tradition. It would be a mistake to respond to those threats with the idea that academic autonomy can be reaffirmed by some sort of return to the university as a hermetically sealed ‘ivory tower’. Insofar as there was any reality in that metaphor, it was dependent on a political economy which structured an elite and exclusionary system of political, economic and social rule and which, to the extent that it was funded through taxation, reinforced inequality. In other words, elite universities would continue to exploit inherited advantage and in so doing benefit from the proverbial ‘Matthew effect’: ‘For whosoever hath, to him shall be given etc.’ For example, Audit Scotland (2016) has calculated that for 2014/15 the 19 Scottish universities held reserves of £2.5 billion, but £1.8 billion of that was held by the 4 ‘ancient’ universities, and £1 billion of that by Edinburgh. Autonomy is always relative.

The expansion of universities should not be reversed and should not take place by reproducing an elite/mass university hierarchy with corresponding demographics of academic workers and students. So in order to break the elite/mass hierarchy, there is perhaps a case to consider the redistribution of accumulated advantage. On the whole, redistribution would encourage pluralism and weaken the trend towards homogenisation encouraged by existing research competition mechanisms such as the REF. It would also strengthen the positions of universities ‘which have pockets of research cultures in particular academic areas but which have their backs to the wall in respect to national pressures for research concentration, to the need to maintain student recruitment levels and perhaps, most of all, to retain or develop a brand image which will help them hold their position in national and international league tables’ (Shattock 2017:16).

So redistribution would help to block the distorting effects of neo-liberal market making mechanisms and, importantly, liberate the economic resources that have been appropriated to implement them. It would also make the case for continued funding of universities through taxation easier to reconcile with social democratic principles even if that would also need an equal distribution of resources to other routes through post-compulsory education. Much vocational and technical training is held back by a difficulty to respond to changes in labour markets and the transformation of work competencies and conditions. A more knowledge-based approach to training, rather than just doing, might enable the beneficiaries of it to have greater impact on determining the development of labour, the production process, and the conditions under which those exist.

That said, it would be crude to reject the scientific and intellectual achievements that universities have accumulated and their contributions to social progress. Rather, they need to be developed by extending scientific and intellectual autonomy across the social sphere. The philosopher George Davie’s 1961 book, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (republished in 2013), is one well known but perhaps rather Whiggish contribution to that project, as well as his 1986 follow up, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: The Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland*, which attacked the narrowness and reliance on rote learning characteristic of Scottish education through which individuals are allocated to a place in social and economic hierarchy. More recently, David Harvey outlined a theory of ‘dialectical utopianism’ in his 2000 book, *Spaces of Hope,* which seeks to support the autonomous development of human capacities. Universities could be one element of a progressive education that aims to do that. Another framework with which to think about the potential contribution of the university to the extension of social autonomy is provided by the way that since the 1970s a group of Italian Marxists, usually categorised as *autonomists*, have taken up Marx’s brief remarks about ‘the general intellect’ in the posthumously published *Grundrisse.* For Marx, the development of machinery had demonstrated that social knowledge, ‘the general productive forces of the social brain’, had become a direct force of production. For the *autonomists,* contemporary capitalism restricts the development of the ‘general intellect’ by confining it to the system of exploitation that is subordinate to commodity production. In the early phase of the development of the internet a lot of hope was attached to its potential to contribute to the creation of a knowledge society. That utopian impulse may have contributed to the acceptance and implementation of computer technologies in universities as a component of teaching. Unfortunately, universities rapidly subordinated teaching and the use of internet connected computers to the demands of the commodity form in order to contribute to a knowledge economy, what some call ‘cognitive capitalism’. In that way the emancipatory potential of collective knowledge production is blocked.

Many academic workers have sought to establish university education outside of the formal university system, such as the ‘slow university’ movement, which provide a range of models with which to improvise progressive education, often with the intention of maintaining the utopian potential of information technology. Others, notably, Thomas Docherty (2014), suggests that academic workers opposed to neo-liberal managerialism should operate in the ‘clandestine university’ in order to maintain an ethical commitment to knowledge and science and uphold standards to prevent standardisation. Teaching and research becomes a sort of asymmetric warfare against the ‘everyday Stalinism’ of the ‘official university’. Those sorts of ideas are good. However, given the massive accumulation of material and intellectual wealth within the established university system, it is important to try and prevent that from becoming further dispossessed through neo-liberal accumulation by pushing back against managerial policies that attempt to control the production of knowledge and subordinate it to external demands formulated by hybrid government/business actors which seek the creation of the ‘entrepreneurial university’. An important problem to consider in that respect is the question of university ownership. Rebecca Boden and her co-authors (2012) have addressed what they see as the ‘ambiguity’ of the legal ownership of universities with respect to their assets, which, to add to their argument, includes the research and teaching produced by academic workers. ‘Ambiguity’ enables managers to exploit autonomy for their own advantage, to assert ownership as management training programmes recommend. Boden and her co-authors state that: ‘…the dispossession of scholars as beneficial owners, and the absence of alternative regulatory, social or market mechanisms of governance has opened the door to uninhibited managerial autonomy’ (Boden *et al.* 2012:19).

The proposed solution is ‘a model in which all university staff and employees, as beneficial owners, hold the organisations in trust on behalf of society as a whole’. That model is the Trust University, which is actually derived in part from the John Lewis Partnership retailer, but where a ‘social compact’ replaces the sale of commodities. On that basis:

*Ownership would be clarified by placing each university’s assets in a non-revocable trust which would hold the formal legal title to the organisation’s assets. This would also create clear governance responsibilities under trust law and prevent the privatisation of publicly funded assets. All current employees (academics and those in other roles) and students would be designated as trust beneficiaries, entitled to utilise university assets and resources.* (Boden *et al.* 2012:21)

Proposals such as these are similar to ideas about the cooperative university. An actually existing model often held up as demonstrating the success of the cooperative university is Mondragòn University in the Spanish Basque Country which combines labour and capital to public ends. As every worker in the university is an owner through payment of a year’s minimum salary, each has a stake in its economic future which is represented by a participatory governing structure. No one is paid more than 6 times the lowest wage, and remuneration is linked to the overall performance of the university. In fact, students pay higher fees than the nominal price paid in the Spanish system subsidised by the state, and the university gains income from the regional cooperative economy. According to Susan Wright and her co-authors (2011) account of their field trip, the governing structure is quite complex. For example, the audit committee is called The Committee of Vigilance. There are several administrative structures divided between faculties, the university administration and research, and involving local companies that the university collaborates with. It would be fair to say that the academic focus of the university is practical and vocational as it has emerged from its economic location. But that need not limit its relevance. That is because dialogue and debate is wired into the decision-making system and managers are elected. Administration is conceived as facilitation and service provision. As the financial model and decision making structure make it difficult for individuals to gain at the expense of everyone else solidarity and cooperation is a common working assumption which counteracts the emergence of self-perpetuating hierarchies and exploitation.

The governing structure operated at Mondragòn would present obstacles to dispossession policies and slow them down. However, that does not mean that university autonomy should be free of external regulation. Such regulation would be a means of preserving autonomy. Boden and her co-authors argue that in addition to Trust law, which would provide a path for legal remedy if universities do not act in accordance with their designated purposes, there is probably a requirement for an external organisation similar to the General Medical Council that would set professional standards of qualifications to undertake academic work, and maintain standards of conduct. Such a Council of Scholars would also negotiate with government around policy formation, replacing Universities UK and Universities Scotland which are elite clubs of university managers with little representative legitimacy. To add another suggestion to that, the UCU and other campus unions could be practically involved in the formation and running of such an organisation. It would also necessarily have a public interest remit which would help to enlarge the social base of participation.

However, it is important to remember that policy formation is a political process, and is part of a wider political context. At present, that context is turbulent, to say the least. With respect to university policy, there are many indications that government has recognised that it has become overloaded and overburdened, not least with respect to the relation between cost and the appearance of the sorts of changes it was supposed to achieve through market making mechanisms. Although the process might pause, it is unlikely to be halted and re-thought as too many costs have already been sunk into it. It is more likely that those who have an interest in its continuation will re-group and invent new ways of achieving them. That said, any opportunities that present the possibility of crisis should be seized as the basis for creating a new hegemonic common sense. Although academic worker participation has not been invited to the UK government’s forthcoming Augur review of post-18 education, this does not mean that action has to be confined to the usual policy channels. Those are likely to be saturated with the usual gaming of outcomes. The 2018 UCU strike shows that the momentum for bottom up change can be intensified. Often overlooked, the main resource that UCU has at its disposal is the intellectual and scientific wealth produced by its members. Instead of just trying to reverse the policy process, that resource should be used to change the terms through which it is established.

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