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“Changing Behaviour:” The Hierarchical and Bureaucratic Imperative of Instrumental Reason in the Corporatized University

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Managing a team of Process Improvement Project Managers, the Head of Process Improvement will champion a change in behavior and culture at QMUL, placing process improvement and the value for money agenda at the heart of professional services both centrally and in academic schools. — Head of Process Improvement, QMUL6529

Advertisement by Queen Mary University of London, 2016

Universities in the Anglophone world of 2020, where teaching posts are ever fewer and contracts are ‘fixed term’ to use the preferred HR euphemism—meaning precarious, temporary and renewed if at all only at the whim of institutions—armies of management and career-bureaucrats are employed in secure and (very) well-paid jobs to run them like corporations and impose this flattening out of any and all attempts to do anything differently and resist corporatization and bureaucratization—because the two go together—in turning Higher Education into a product purchased by the student-consumer and ‘generating revenue’ for the institution. As Cruickshank notes ‘The Feudal University in the Age of Gaming the System’,

Audits render professional practice ‘transparent’ by setting targets with the result that professionals gear up their behaviour to meeting those targets, as the bureaucratic tail wags the professional dog. Gaming the system becomes the order of the day. Teaching to the test rather than teaching to inspire a passion for learning in itself is one major consequence of this.

What could be better called *micromanagement* complete with *monitoring* and *surveillance* to as far as possible render it impossible to operate in such an environment without complying with its demands is presented as ‘transparency’, just as the wholesale corporatization of universities is presented as giving students ‘value for money’. What Moore (2017) has called *The Quantified Self* to refer to a definite tendency and demand from employers in the era of Late Capitalism to cynically make use of precarious and insecure conditions which they themselves helped create to their advantage and the disadvantage of—sometime—employees, is also applicable to the Corporate University and its importing of what can be defined as a hi-tech *neo-Taylorism* into everyday social relations and to make all research ‘of use’ to ‘generating revenue’ for the institution. Questioning whether this is necessary or desirable, much less *opposing* and *resisting* it is of course dangerous: for ‘permanent’ faculty and adjunct or contingent sometime faculty alike, dangerous because it will flag those—attempting—to do so as ‘difficult’ and mark them for redundancy and/or non-renewal of temporary ‘fixed term’ contracts.

Cruickshank correctly adds that the quantification of the abstract at every turn and bureaucratic and metric tyranny like to claim that they are ‘not normative’ that value judgements do not enter into it: indeed career-bureaucrats can only answer in templates of what Spicer (2017) calls *Business Bullshit*—and (Leary 2019) calls *Key Words: The New Language of Capitalism* which of course claims to be about ‘efficiency’ and ‘best practice’: the One-Dimensional (Marcuse 1964) elimination of anything outside of this application of the Dismal Science. “Transparency does not build trust but presumes a lack of it” (ibid) and the imposition of this is itself very much because the Corporate University is aware of the

onerous and resented nature of teaching being delivered to test and research being erroneously judged for ‘quality’ according to how many ‘stars’ the publication has and better still, whether faculty “secure external income” for the institution. That the corporatization of the university involves *compulsion* and *coercion* both covert and overt, and top-down demands to ‘live and breathe’ its Shiny Happy brand, is something that is not at all ‘consensual’ but *imposed* as the keynote of such an instrumental project.

Data, Citation and Apparent Worth

To be sure, ‘data’ is supposed to be ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ just as bureaucracy and bureaucrats are supposedly ‘fair’ and not very much about the reproduction of the system at all costs: form over content, means over ends, or rather means become an end in themselves, the ostensible end they were originally created to serve long since lost—if it were ever really about any such thing. In the course of writing this reply to Cruickshank’s essay the author spoke to an archaeologist with experience of both British and American universities,

You are so right about corporatization going hand in hand with bureaucratization, I was thinking similar. That in the push to transform academic institutions into profit-bearing entities, they've shifted resources in such a way that an unreasonable amount seem to be now allocated towards this kind of self-serving, circular business of paying the managers/bureaucrats to ‘run the business’, rather than the people who actually produce the “product” of education so there's a movement of resources from the worker to the managers, as in other business. —
Anonymous archaeologist

As is contended in *The Feudal University*, all research becomes limited to and circumscribed by publishing articles in the ‘right’ journals which gain—a lot—of citations, and has little to do with originality or anything critical, since blank tautology is neither. ‘Significance’ doesn’t mean significant because it is known by anyone outside of a specialization of a specialization, just as impact doesn’t mean it has an effect on the wider world and non-academics but rather that it can be tracked to being made use of by instrumental policy making, “Writing for significance means repetitiously citing the big names in the field and in the social sciences engaged in applied work over theoretical work” (ibid).

Cruickshank’s essay crucially identifies all of the problems besetting universities in 2020 and is unsparing in its incising of the corporate veneer of ‘can do’ positivity toward such contemptible instrumental reason. Neoliberalism, which has been the dominant economic model for 40 years of course *marketizes* everything and sees the market as a supreme good in itself, all other areas of life being made straightforward means to that extremely dubious—and disputed—end. Neoliberalism whilst maintaining that ‘market knows best’, also goes hand in glove with *bureaucracy* and bureaucratic systems: literally a form-to-fill-in-a-form and meetings-about-having-meetings: above all else *procedures to follow*.

These procedures being ‘objective and neutral’ and ‘fair’ (sic) taken on their own terms supposedly supercede the earlier ‘feudal’ university by streamlining it into a corporatized and bureaucratized struggle of each-against-all and ‘democratizing hierarchy’ and allowing entry

to join ‘the right club’ (ibid) so that all of the things bureaucracy and standardization in the Weberian sense are meant to reduce: personal tyranny, favouritism, nepotism, ‘knowing the right people’, and corruption of every other kind, are not only *upheld* but *facilitated* by endless procedural structures and are ideal for those of a certain temperament and personality type who are attracted to such organizational forms, just as the ‘formal tyranny’ of box-ticking and the supposed ‘democracy’ of official documents heavy with by-lines and sub clauses setting out how people are expected to act in the university, *informal tyranny* can and does prevail—and is facilitated by—such ‘formalized’ bureaucratic tyranny.

The Role of Critique

It must be said that the professoriate is in large part indifferent to all of what this essay is about and to the essay it is a reply to, as much as the bigger Collective Dialogue ‘Neoliberalism, Technocracy and Higher Education’ and this special issue of *Social Epistemology*, because in its self-enclosed fiefdom—in the worst traditions of the pre-neoliberal feudal university—it is unaffected as it sees it, by corporatization and bureaucratization. They become ‘Barons who have, in conditions of increased precarity, even more power as gatekeepers’ (ibid), just as any new intake of faculty to the Fortress Academy becomes an assault course of contingency and insecurity predicted on whether a ‘hiring committee’ effectively tossing a coin picks an individual—regardless of how many rounds of interviews are involved, the dozens of ‘unsuccessful applicants’ whether ‘shortlisted’ or not being able to console themselves with the insipid classical liberal if not neoliberal wisdom that ‘the best person got the job’.

In bold contradistinction to corporatization and bureaucratization, Cruickshank argues that ‘the very process of higher education, irrespective of the subject matter engaged with, should be a transformative process, that disrupts and challenges pre-existing prejudices and ideals’ (ibid), what one would hope the experience of university and Higher Education still manages to be against all odds, the corporatized and bureaucratized university being the biggest single impediment toward this being possible.

This reply to Cruickshank and contribution to the ongoing collective Dialogue *Neoliberalism, Technocracy and Higher Education Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* contends that *critique* which is *antagonistic* and *oppositional* both individual and collective is the surest standpoint from which to start contesting and *negating* the corporatization and bureaucratization of Higher Education, what Fleming (2017) calls ‘market malice’ which infuses the Neoliberal University—corporatized and bureaucratized, as a product of neoliberal society ‘The growing winter of a wasted world, a vapid monoculture of nothingness encircling us as we speak, [that it is] time to leave.’

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