Comment on Finn Collin and David Budtz Pedersen: “The Frankfurt School, Science and Technology Studies, and the Humanities”
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The discussion of philosophical views on science seems often to have overlooked the humanities. Therefore it is praiseworthy that Finn Collin and David Budtz Pedersen, both from the University of Copenhagen, take on the relationship between recent views of (natural-) sciences and their sometimes only implicit indications on the humanities for a more thorough investigation.

The main argument, as I read the paper, is that both the German debate and the British debate on science and studies of science tend to stress a one fits all argument—not taking into account the less instrumental sides of both the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. A critique of instrumentalism and a critique of constructivism lay a foundation for the paper. And, in addition, a critique of the entrepreneurial university; that is, so to speak, embodying an instrumental view of all knowledge. A critique that is also praiseworthy in the eyes of this commenter.

A few overall points of critique shall be listed. Thereafter, a comment on Habermas’ position on the role of the humanities and the idea of a university will follow. The comment will end with a discussion on the historical causes of externalism in research policies and the birth of the entrepreneurial university.

Initial Observations

A first observation is that there are frequent jumps between considerations of the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities especially in the introductory part that somewhat disturb the picture (e.g. mid page 11 an ambiguous jump from “science” to “social science” in one sentence). But more seriously also the final critique of Habermas seems to confuse considerations of natural sciences and the humanities. Habermas’ position is, therefore, to be discussed below.

Collin and Pedersen indicate that the STS-School has consciously and purposefully “overlooked” the social construction of knowledge in the humanities themselves, as this would weaken their argument against the “representationalisme,” “realism” and thus the non-societal nature of the natural sciences (20). I find that this view over interprets the possible strategic action of the members of this school of thought. Reading and concluding from the silence of the sources is not a strong argument.

There is also a jump in the article between considering STS and the Two Cultures Debate—these for me seem more or less unrelated. The British debate on the humanities is equated with the positions of C.P. Snow and his opponent F.R. Leavis— the last of these being strangely alone in the world so to speak (mentioned is the “absence of inputs” from historians and philosophers page 18). One could wish for broader references to the
educational debates on liberal education in the Anglo-Saxon world, from Matthew Arnold over the Harvard report to the present day including Martha Nussbaum and others. However, this may be a question of taste in choice of topic between philosophers and educators (Larsen 2006a; 2006b; 2015 [forthcoming]).

Two final shorter observations: Firstly that the proposed “instrumentalism” of Habermas has been less debated in German research policy than the compensation argument (Ritter/Marquard)—at least that is my reading of the developments of German policies on the humanities. And secondly that the chronology of the German arguments is a bit confused: Marquard (1958) and Ritter (1961) with their arguments of compensation were before or contemporary with Habermas (1966) and Gadamer’s (1960) quoted works being published (bottom of page 13).

**Habermas’ Position and the Humanities**

The so called German argument, along with the Two Cultures Debate in the UK, are in the introduction characterized as “efforts in support of the humanities”—however, they would “in the end prove fruitless, even somewhat self-defeating” (1). Central to this argument is that both the Two Culture Debate and the Frankfurt School allegedly adopt a purely instrumentalist view of all science and scholarship.

In this context, Habermas is seen as a central figure in promoting an instrumental view of all science and scholarship. This is stated for a larger group by Collin and Pedersen as an “instrumentalist view of science promoted both by Habermas and other later-generation representatives of the Frankfurt School and by STS” (25). I believe this statement mixes up the view of the natural sciences with the view of the humanities. Both the earlier work by Habermas on knowledge interests and the later work both on communicative rationality and that on the university can be read otherwise.

The overall societal critique by Habermas seeks indeed to counter an instrumentalist logic. In the theory of communicative action Habermas criticizes a too narrow understanding of rationality as being only “cognitive-instrumental” and suggests a much broader view on rationality as also including the praxis of communicative action. His views on system and life-world are well known (Habermas 1995, 27ff). And I tend to read Habermas to the effect of a clear separation of the different branches of science and scholarship. His view on the natural sciences may be (too) instrumental—throwing all natural sciences from environmental biology to elementary physics into one category. I n the view of contemporary cuts on specific topics in the name of the entrepreneurial university this is not a nuanced view of the role and significance of the natural sciences. Especially research on the problems of non-human life tends to be disregarded by the entrepreneurial university promoters because of its non-instrumental character.

However, Habermas’ views on the role of the humanities can be read as serving a much more diverse agenda. His later work on the university as an institution of learning
processes clearly outlines a critique of the entrepreneurial university—and defends instead the university understood as a life-world (Habermas 1986). In 1986 Habermas states the roles of the university in contemporary societies thus: “Going beyond mere academic career preparation, they (the University learning processes) contribute to general socialization processes by introducing students to the mode of scientific thinking, i.e. to the adoption of a hypothetical attitude vis-à-vis facts and norms. Going beyond the acquisition of expert knowledge, they contribute to intellectual enlightenment by offering informed interpretations and diagnoses of contemporary events, and by taking concrete political stands. Going beyond mere reflection on methodology and basic theory, they contribute to the self-understanding of the sciences (Wissenschafien) within the whole of culture by supplying theories of science, morality, art and literature” (1986, 715).

As a broad impact on culture Habermas sees the university to have contributed to the development of the freedom and differentiation of research disciplines, and benefitted society with a certain “utopian” ideal of universalistic and individualistic values that has upheld a critical potential. This is seen as a specific trait of the occidental development. Also writers on higher education like Björn Wittrock state universalism and cosmopolitan viewpoints to be typical in the development of universities somewhat inspired by Habermas (Wittrock 1996). This leads to the following conclusion by Habermas:

The egalitarian and universalistic content of their forms of argumentation expresses only the norms of scientific discourse, not those of society as a whole. But they share in a pronounced way that communicative rationality, the forms of which modern societies (which are without Leitbils from the past) must employ to understand themselves (1986, 717).

My reading of these quotes suggests a strong non-instrumental role of the humanities held by Habermas. Moreover, his ideas on the role of the university in contemporary society can be seen as highly critical of a reduction of the university to an entrepreneurial site.

However, one thing is what philosophers tend to agree or disagree on—another thing is politics.

**Over- or Under-Estimating the Impact of, say, the Humanities: A Note on the Causes of Externality in Research Policies**

Collin and Pedersen seem to go for the throat of a few select scholars—Habermas being the prime target. There is thus a tendency to exaggerate the influence of (some) philosophers and their significance for the broad political picture and reduce the impact of others as “subtle and complex”.

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Collin and Pedersen also use more historical arguments. They agree to a neoliberal surge in global politics since 1980 being a cause of the emergence of the “entrepreneurial university” (21). To argue for causality on the grounds of synchronicity is, however, a bit farfetched:

It is hardly an accident that the emergence of the entrepreneurial university coincided with a new generation of STS scholars that would establish a new dominant discourse for articulation the relationship between science and society, eclipsing for good the frameworks within which The Frankfurt School, C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis had discussed it (22).

For me this brings to mind an anecdote quoted by the Danish historian Uffe Østergaard at a conference: “When attacked medical doctors quite quickly establish a wagon fortress, as in the Wild West, and shoot out against all attackers—when attacked humanist scholars equally quickly establish a wagon fortress and shoot—at each other!”

It seems a truism, but it is necessary to state again, that external pressures on academia are external. They seldom follow a philosopher in his/her more subtle conceptual distinctions—these being either deeply “ontological or methodological” (24). The very idea in new university governance of external actors even seems to celebrate a non-academic approach to relevance. The university boards of the Danish variants of entrepreneurial universities are supposed to have a majority of non-academic members—as to make sure they have not read Habermas (bluntly speaking).

History as a discipline is traditionally, and is still to a large degree, a search for causes. Causality may be contested by the very constructivist philosophers that Collin and Pedersen criticize here and elsewhere (Collin 2012, 57-88). But to view philosophical thought as a prime mover in international politics is not feasible. Politics, arguably, have an intricate logic of power, money and maybe ideas. Instead of ascribing named philosophers as either guilty or not-guilty of this or that political development in society I, as a historian, would seek other, maybe more decisive, causes of explanation. Research policy and educational policy are primarily framed politically and not so much by philosophers. Of course, the tools of politics are discursive; politicians do things with words—and wordings tend to travel from the realm of social and human life into the political agendas. So, yes, a philosopher may end up being used for legitimizing a political trend, but is hardly a “cause” of this trend. I will therefore look elsewhere for causes.

Where does externality in research and university policies come from if not from villainous philosophical minds? It is illuminating to look at the chronology of externality. A German debater, Reinhard Brandt, sees the humanities (and universities) as having their protectors throughout history; first, the church and then the nation state. But now, in
a time of corporate states, who shall protect these disciplines?\(^1\)

This points to the logic of the externalists. There has been, since the Middle Ages, a societal framing of the humanities, social sciences and the natural sciences.

Looking closer at the twentieth century, however, the idea of internality stood in clear opposition towards the celebrated externality of research policies in the early Soviet Union. Even before the Second World War the humanities, at least including philosophy of language, developmental psychology and educational thinking was a part of an east-west conflict. The Piaget/Vygotsky debate serves as an example. Thus, externality was embraced in the research policies of communist countries as internality was celebrated, maybe more than before, by historians and sociologists of science in the west. The celebration of internality by the so called Koyré paradigm, after the Russian/French historian of science Alexandre Koyré, or that of Robert K. Merton did thus not appear in a vacuum. It appeared as counterpart to the externalism of realized socialism.

While broadly military in nature, the cold war was ideological and economic. And it is clear that the west, at least since the Sputnik shock, was to learn from the east. The shift from Vannevar Bush and his linear model of innovation viewpoints in his report “Science: The Endless Frontier” from 1945 to OECD with its tentative externalism in the early 1960s can, in my view, be explained mostly by international mimetic response. The OECD was, at the outset, more subtle in the double wording of “policy for science” versus “science for policy” (the last also spells science for economy). The negative impression of Stalinism contributed to a degree of non-interference. However, this threat of totalitarianism was slowly forgotten.

In 1963 OECD commissioned a study on the ‘technology gap’ between America and Europe. The historian Edgeir Benum states that there was no such gap, and that the study derived “its language and urgency from Cold War rivalries seemingly unrelated to the state of the universities, either in the East or West” (2007, 369). Benum goes on to analyze the turn to “relevance” in the OECD policies on research in the late 1960s. “A massive research effort in fields selected by reference to national goals”—or “goals which meet the needs of the community”—was repeatedly recommended by the OECD. While the USA was the obvious point of departure, in many respects the OECD approach resonated with traditions of European planning.

If from false premises or maybe from the soviet bloc the OECD had learned that direct investment in and political control of research was a way to strengthen both economy and military. By 1968 OECD expressed this as a necessary shift from “policy for science” to “policy through science” that is to show what governments should do to use science to achieve national objectives. Benum predates most of the views of Mode 2 to this earlier turn in international research politics—quite a while before Gibbons et al. began to turn STS into a vehicle of (entrepreneurial) university reform (371).

\(^1\) Brandt cited in Greiner, U. “Es is die Kultur ihr Trottel” in Zeit 18 (2004).
The ideas of national innovation systems, of institutional competition and the view of R&D as decisive in the international economic race for supremacy thus proliferated during the long post-war period. The argument of this comment is that these political ideas have, more than individual philosophical minds, been the birth maiden of the entrepreneurial university. In contrast to Collin and Pedersen I would stress that these ideas have not been promoted in a purely neoliberal political atmosphere; they were rather children of the cold war—on both sides of the political spectrum.

As for the left wing in European politics ambivalence from western Marxists towards the Soviet Union was maybe more the rule than the exception. But I would argue that the celebration of “research for the people” by western Marxist politicians in the early 1970s was indeed inspired by the early externalism in the Soviet Union. The Danish university historian Else Hansen has coined the relation between right wing externalists and left wing externalists in the 1970s as: “The forgotten alliance” (Hansen 2008). The university laws of the 1970s in Denmark has been seen as a victory of the youth revolts of 1968, but was in fact supported by right wing politicians of the established political elite. Externalism in the views on research and university education was the common denominator.

This story is however not convenient to either of the two groups. The right wing politicians promoted “research for the users” (in industry, agriculture, health etc.) and the left wing politicians promoted “research for the people”. The difference was maybe clear then, but seems later to have disappeared into a common political agreement on the entrepreneurial university. The more recent resemblance between neoliberals on the right wing and western Marxists on the left wing, in the case of research politics, has actually been pointed to by Collin in a contribution to the Danish debate (Collin 2007, 28-48).

In this political game the losers were the researchers trying to defend their autonomy on academic grounds. Academic autonomy was contested from both the right and the left. And given that constellation it seems fair to include different philosophical schools as either promoting or fighting this trend that, in 1985, was coined an epistemic drift towards external criteria of relevance by the sociologist Aant Elzinga (Elzinga 1985). I agree that both the British STS and the German Frankfurt School played a role seemingly on the left side of the political spectrum. One must look for less well-known characters like Odo Marquard in Germany and Frank Raymond Leavis in the UK to find a counter discourse to the overall trend of externalism. It also seems obvious that the later inventers

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of Mode II and Triple Helix ideas are to be seen also as promoters of the entrepreneurial university. But is it fair to view these aspects as representatives of STS?

Conclusion

The schools mentioned by Collin and Pedersen neither invented, nor were guilty of initiating, externalism in research and/or university policy. Trying to prove the fact that all scholarship and science is somehow societal does not make these scholars guilty of promoting the entrepreneurial university agenda. Stronger actors on both political wings set the scene of this takeover of academia. The move towards externalism was taken earlier than Collin and Pedersen suggest. Whether the international competition during the cold war, European eagerness for planning, the advent of the competitive state, the eclipse of capitalism, or the original ideas of Marxists and Neoliberals, the real causes will not be decided here.

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References


