“The Feudal University in the Age of Gaming the System”

Justin Cruickshank, University of Birmingham, j.cruickshank@bham.ac.uk

One wonders if Paul Ricoeur is turning in his grave as the hermeneutics of suspicion leaves Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to become a statist project. Out goes ideology, resentment, and the workings of id, which function as the suspicious origins of ideas and statements which are not to be taken at face value by the critic-analyst, and in comes the state to render suspicious the origin of behaviour in professional practice. Professional autonomy is akin to feudal guilds protecting labour market privilege. Therefore, any claim to professionalism has to be rendered suspicious.

**The Audit Culture**

In place of using theory to unmask the claims of professionals to show them to be manifestations of self-interest, audit culture, increasingly enhanced by digital technology and big data to allow real-time monitoring, is used to replace professional-institutional opacity with bureaucratic legibility to use Scott’s (1985, 1998) term to describe the key feature of the modern state. 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.

Audits are meant to be neutral, technocratic, measurements but are of course politically motivated and normative not just in the sense that the audit criteria are driven by the state’s own views of what ought to be achieved, but normative in the sense that as O’Neill (2002) argued, any drive for transparency presumes that those being monitored ought not to be trusted. Transparency does not build trust but presumes a lack of it, given a suspicion of professionals, and replaces trust with data that is to be used instrumentally by public service users positioned now as customers. The state ought to be rendered suspicious but in claiming to swap politics as the pursuit of the good society for economics as the realisation of working to ‘objective’ market forces it seeks to present itself as merely technocratic.

The impact of this on higher education is increased instrumentalising of knowledge production. Students are positioned as customers purchasing human capital for zero-sum competition with other graduates who, as customers, need to be confident — rather than trustful - that the ‘brand’ they consume from will ‘deliver’ a ‘product’ that they will be ‘satisfied’ with. The academic delivering the products will increasingly need to be entertaining, to ensure efficient expedited consumption, and to be relevant in the sense that the more abstract material is replaced by more practically and immediately relevant material.

With a view on the audit regimes around research as well as teaching, academics in the UK are increasingly expected to apply for grants to boost a brand’s prestige and income, to send articles only to a prescribed list of journals deemed best for the REF, and to write for ‘significance’ over originality. Writing for significance means repetitiously citing the big names in the field and in the social sciences engaged in applied work over theoretical work, so that the work may not only garner citations from other academics but also gain ‘impact’ through it being consumed by non-academic audiences. The rise in precarity only serves to
J. Cruickshank

intensify the disciplining of academics to ensure they generate and deliver what the brand demands for its ‘stakeholders’.

This is not to imply that universities in the days before neoliberalism were ideal domains. Universities in the past, especially in the UK, were deeply connected to the reproduction of class inequalities and the legitimisation of privilege. Even now in the supposedly meritocratic neoliberal era, it is the case that to come from a privileged background is more important than the qualifications attained in securing high level professional employment (see the 2016 IFS study by Britton, Dearden, Shepard and Vignoles, and the recent BBC documentary ‘How to Break into the Elite’). Intersectional prejudice operating along class, ethnic and gender lines, did and still does exist. Employment in senior roles and curricula often excluded certain groups to focus on privileged white men, and this still occurs today too (see Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu 2018).

The Value of Universities and Solidarity

Authoritarian relations which could slide into bullying and exploitation were not absent from universities, and still are not (see Ahmed (2017) on this). Departments could have competing ‘big names’, each with their own platoon of loyal graduate students, jockeying for position. And this can continue today. Intellectual fads and fashions could—and still can—dominate departments and academic culture with appointments, article reviewing and general collegiality all impacted upon by whether someone was in the right club with regard to their ‘intellectual position’. Favouritism and corruption did and may still continue. Problems with research ethics existed and certainly do exist now as the problem of replicability shows in current STEM publishing.

The pre neoliberal university could have been called a feudal university with the departmental big names being the competing barons using any means to jockey for position. The arrival of neoliberal audit culture and increased managerialism did not necessarily replace this but could simply intensify it. Barons who game the system best could have, in conditions of increased precarity, even more power as gatekeepers.

Where does this leave any attempt at arguing for the value of universities? Collini (2012) argued that the language of customer satisfaction was inappropriate for university teaching because participating in higher education should entail a process of dissatisfaction. What Collini meant by this was that students unlike customers do not have an accurate pre-formed idea of what it is that they are ‘consuming’, not least because 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.

In Rortian (1989) terms, it should destabilise one’s ‘final vocabulary’. One can add to this though the argument that academics need to seek to be more dissatisfied. This would mean not using ideas instrumentally to garner ‘outputs’ with ‘significance’ and keeping customers unchallenged and satisfied. But what would the social-institutional conditions for this have to be and what would some or most academics have to do to see the creation of such conditions of knowledge production and dissemination? Would it require the transcendence of capitalism and patriarchy or would it be possible to start building an alternative before
their overcoming? Does changing the curriculum better help enable a process of dissatisfaction in the present? Do co-operative universities offer a liberating way forward?

Before many academics engaged in activities to change current practices would current academics have to change to be motivated to seek out a more solidaristic approach that saw life in a university in a non-instrumental way and replaced it for learning with others? Many said the recent strike in the UK over the pensions issue was an eye-opener because instead of working alone in their offices and worrying about audit data they had a sense of solidarity and community. Maybe a sense of solidarity has to pre-empty any search for dissatisfaction and such a sense may not need to be restricted to other academics but to everyone in the university.

References


