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Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Zelizer, Barbie, (ed.) *Making the university matter*. Shaping inquiry in culture, communication and media studies. Routledge, Abingdon, 2011, pp. 135-143. ISBN 9780415782395

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Available in LSE Research Online: Oct 2013

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**POST-NEOLIBERAL ACADEMIC VALUES:
NOTES FROM THE UK HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR**

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‘In lending itself too much to the purposes of government, a university fails its higher purpose’.¹

William Fulbright’s language of ‘higher’ purpose, tendered in 1970, sounds quaint now, but the idea that the contemporary university has for decades experienced a conflict of values is important. A recent UK version of such a conflict is worthy of discussion. For 15 years UK academic production has been intensively regulated, first through the Research Assessment Exercise (‘RAE’), where ‘higher education institutions’ (HEIs) received *core* (ie basic institutional) research funding calculated by reference to the performance of those disciplinary ‘units’ that submitted for peer evaluation sample research ‘outputs’ and documentation on overall research production. This is to be replaced by a ‘research excellence framework’ (‘REF’). My focus addresses the link between such research regulation and wider economic pressures within the discourse of neoliberalism.² Developing a counter-rationality to neoliberalism provides *one* test of whether the university itself *can* still matter.

The UK ‘higher education’ sector is distinctive. Excepting sectors such as medicine, law and business, UK universities have (by US standards) low or non-existent endowments, relying more on public funding and student fees. Public funding is managed nationally (by the government’s agency for the university sector, HEFCE) and open to lobbying by university unions, industry and other national sources. The management of higher education is in other

respects less centralized than in some European countries, such as France, with no central government control over appointments, teaching contracts or curricula and an open labour market. Research funding is potentially available across the disciplinary field, including the arts and humanities, and not limited to the physical and medical sciences and the most policy-focussed social sciences. This chapter considers how research is regulated in this context.

³The form that market forces have taken in the UK HEI sector is unique. Under the RAE, assessment has been managed through a structure of 'subject panels' operating through peer assessment; in the past 2-3 years the university sector, particularly the arts and humanities and social sciences, has diverted a UK Treasury attempt to switch evaluation entirely to a citations base. Note the rigid disciplinary divisions that underlie the 'subject panel' structure. This is like a family tree which allocates academic areas to different family branches. It is proposed to reduce the number of subject panels. Until now media and communications research has been evaluated as a subpanel (called 'Communication, Cultural and Media Studies') within a larger main panel that includes Library and Information Management. Next time media research can hope at best to comprise an informal subgroup within a panel partly populated by library scientists. The powers of such informal groups are unclear; the likely recognition of interdisciplinary research – for example with Philosophy (dealt with by a different panel from Media) or Sociology (in an entirely different branch of the family tree from Media) - is even more unclear.

The regulatory 'teeth' of this system lie not in the harmless sounding values that it serves ('research excellence') but in the *self-regulatory* behaviour it engenders. Of course other systems can have similar effects. So in the largely US debate about 'public sociology' a number of writers complain about the culture of overproduction generated by the US tenure system.⁴ This has long been the complaint of UK academics labouring under the RAE, where the requirement of at least four 'outputs' per assessment period (usually one monograph and

three peer-reviewed articles over 5-6 years) has been the norm. But the proposed new framework (REF) deepens and widens government's management of the research process in ways that are worth following.

The Rise of the Impact Entrepreneur?

REF allocates only 60% formally to the 'excellence' of research, 25% to 'impact' and 15% to 'research environment'.⁵ The formal weight given to impact at 25% may be negotiated downwards, but its importance is non-negotiable. Evaluated 'units' (such as departments) must establish their excellence across all three elements including 'the following key characteristics of excellence':

a. Production of a portfolio of high-quality, original and rigorous research, including work which is world-leading in moving the discipline forward, innovative work pursuing new lines of enquiry, *and activity effectively building on this to achieve impact beyond the discipline, benefiting the economy or society.*

b. Effective sharing of its research findings with a range of audiences.

c. *Building effectively on excellent research through a range of activity leading to benefits to the economy and society, including engagement with a range of stakeholders in developing and conducting its research and applying findings.*

d. A high-quality, forward-looking research environment conducive to a continuing flow of excellent research and to its effective dissemination *and application.*

e. Significant contributions to the sustainability and vitality of the research base.⁶

Getting the highest score on research quality, while ignoring ‘impact’ and ‘environment’ (which incidentally takes account of levels of project-based research funding), is not an option. Impact is, implicitly, the *telos* at which all research development should be aimed.

Why might ‘impact’ have disturbing consequences for the ‘university that matters’? First, securing ‘impact’ for one’s research means more than promoting it within academic settings: ‘we do *not* intend to include impact through intellectual influence on scientific knowledge and academia – this is fully recognised within the “outputs” and “environment” elements of the REF’.⁷ To qualify as research at all, work must already have been ‘effectively shared’, whatever that means.⁸ Second, the process for ‘building on’ research in ‘excellent’ departments is assumed to involve liaising ‘with a range of stakeholders in *developing* and conducting [] research and applying findings’:⁹ consulting stakeholders in advance on what research they *might* find interesting will no doubt be rewarded.

Third, the proposed definition of impact is problematic:

Impact: An assessment of demonstrable economic and social impacts that have been achieved through activity within the submitted unit that builds on excellent research . . . to make a positive impact on the economy and society within the assessment period.¹⁰

This definition is glossed in a footnote: ‘throughout this document, where we refer to “impact” or “social and economic impact”, we include economic, social, public policy, cultural and quality of life impacts’. Nonetheless two yawning gaps are apparent. ‘Public policy’ covers work within domains currently recognised in public policy, but what of work that is *critical* of public policy, and of the parameters set for public policy? Clearly such work cannot show influence on public policy, yet there is no wider recognition of influence on

politics or civil society. At a stroke the public engagement with civil society that Michael Burawoy envisaged for ‘public sociology’¹¹ is ruled out. Nor is there allowance for work whose impact is *transnational*, or at least not securely caught within the container of the nation-state.¹² There is clear tension within a framework that claims to reward research for its international excellence (‘world-leading’ in the jargon) yet assesses its impact by consulting exclusively national stakeholders, including non-academic endusers who will assess ‘impact’. All this without even touching on the difficulties of showing impact of *any* sort if you work in philosophy, history, classical languages . . .

Then there are wider normative questions. A highly contestable external value (impact) is being translated into a measurement system, with all the rigidity and pressure towards commodification that implies. The idea that research should sometimes aim to influence the practices of those beyond the academy is hardly objectionable; it informs important developments such as ‘action research’,¹³ and has been the subject of conflicted debate *inside the academy* since Max Weber¹⁴ and, later, the birth of critical sociology.¹⁵ But, as the recent debate over ‘public sociology’ shows,¹⁶ there is little agreement either (strategically) about which ‘publics’ are the appropriate ones to address or (tactically) about whether better research is produced by *not* aiming directly at impact and allowing this to develop as a side-effect or (practically) about how far a healthy research environment can exist without a range of work that is *unconcerned* with external impact (general theory, investigations into methodology). If self-generated debates on the ‘public value’ of research are unresolved, how can ‘impact’ (or any similar term) be appropriately *imposed* as a ‘measure’ by government - without undermining the reflexivity about research’s aims that should be internal to academic fields?

University ‘research units’ will be required to submit an ‘impact statement’ as part of their submission to the research assessment process. The accumulative language in which

such statements are described assumes that the products of research can be pre-calibrated in terms of their ‘impacts’ *just as economic outputs are*. For some academic subjects the measure may be plausible (civil engineering?) but its general relevance is far from obvious: ‘it is pie-in-the-sky to think that an administrator in Bristol [home of HEFCE] is going to come up with [a measure of research impact] that economic consultants have been chasing for decades’ (Jonathan Adams, director of research evaluation for Thomson Reuters quoted *Guardian*, 13 October 2009). However, the mandatory prioritizing of economic and market-based values is characteristic of neoliberalism. There is a sociological word for the importing of external measures and values into a distinctive field of production: heteronomy.¹⁷

The REF proposals are, as I write, the subject of intense lobbying by discipline associations, universities, trade unions and individuals, with a petition lodged on the 10 Downing Street website that calls for research to be evaluated by excellence alone.¹⁸ We do not yet know what concessions from HEFCE will be extracted, although such concessions in turn may be trumped by government fiat, backed by the threat to cut government-supported research activity even more drastically. Let me concentrate instead on a wider question: what are the implications of a university system (such as the UK’s) introducing a heteronomous value into academic life that competes directly with the notion of peer-assessed research quality (I leave aside debates about the negative consequences of evaluating research in terms of measured ‘outputs’: that’s another story)? What incentives remain under the new system for anyone (especially those seeking to enter the profession) to plan research with no discernible potential for ‘impact’? How will we stop the rise-to-dominance of ‘impact entrepreneurs’ whose research is preformulated to demonstrate impact easily? We know enough about the influence on the university of the pharmaceutical industries or the military-industrial complex not to be naively surprised at such a possibility.¹⁹ But the UK case represents the *normalisation* of such heteronomy across the *whole* sector. Many UK

academics are worried – most vocally in pure sciences, philosophy and literature – about the consequences of the new framework for sustaining *any* university that might matter.

The wider UK context is one of neoliberal governmentality. A recent policy document by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills which oversees universities leaves no doubt as to the organising purpose of the proposed changes: ‘those institutions that can demonstrate a track record of delivering [economic] impact from their research will be rewarded’.²⁰ The same document illustrates Nikolas Rose’s concept of ‘governing through freedom’ perfectly: ‘freed to define their own strategies for achieving core national priorities, our universities and colleges have innovated and adapted . . . The chief role of Government is to empower [universities] to deliver.’²¹

Habits of resistance

We cannot respond to such pressures except, as Andrew Ross has argued, by being clear-sighted about the conditions of our own practice.²² We must recognize our location in the ‘neoliberal university’,²³ where the internal damage to professional and personal values from market conditions is a fact of life no worse perhaps, but also *no less disabling*, than in the non-academic domains whose processes or products we research. It is incoherent (but fully consistent with Foucault’s understanding of the productivity of power) for academics to admire Richard Sennett’s analysis of ‘corrosion of character’ in contemporary economies²⁴ or Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s analysis of the destructive side-effects of ‘the new spirit of capitalism’²⁵ *without* considering how those same conditions may be corroding ‘us’.²⁶

Academic freedom is of course not a natural fact, but a contingent construction, sustained by compromises between conflicting forces (government, business, civil society, the general public). The values we *develop* for defending academic autonomy are not

decorative, but essential to our practice. For a time perhaps, those values could be assumed as consensual but not now. Consider the words of the police superintendent hero/antihero of Jose Saramago's novel *Seeing*, published in the wake of the 2003 declaration of war on Iraq: "not only are the people in government never put off by what we judge to be absurd, they make use of absurdities to dull consciences and destroy reason."²⁷

With those words in mind, the resources from which resistance might be constructed are worth considering. Broadly speaking, solidarity is important but how best can we support each other? I have been struck over the past five years how, when with colleagues from close by or from afar we have read texts together or created time to discuss each other's work in detail, people have remarked on how rare, and how needed, this is. Under conditions of intensified and externally directed individual competition, it is important to create spaces for more open exchange and to conduct our practice in ways that sustain a sense that *each other's* work matters. Too obvious perhaps to state as a value, except when we realise it is only by a *collective* effort that the *systemic* threats to research autonomy can begin to be challenged (individually we may protect ourselves from the storm for a while, yet collectively and for the future all lose). That means acknowledging how the 'spirit of system' (Samuel Beckett)²⁸ leads us to impose unnecessary 'system-like' demands on our colleagues, not least on those just entering the academic world, the doctoral students: do the deadlines and requirements for conformity we regularly impose upon each other serve any real purpose? More broadly, we must translate this principle into *transnational* solidarity, since, if national regulatory structures as in the UK are ambiguous in incentivizing transnational collaborations, it is we, as academics, who must work hard to sustain them.

We must also not fall into the trap of accepting a narrowly instrumental role for the university that undermines individuals' and groups' ability to reflect *for themselves* on why

their work matters and to whom.²⁹ I will not therefore offer any blueprint for how the university should matter. Questions of how research might matter cannot be reduced to a formula, for their inherent contestability constitutes one of the distinctive key areas of academic freedom. Pressure on academic autonomy is part of wider transformations in governments' relations to 'professional' and other work sectors under neoliberalism (in the UK, medical practitioners, schoolteachers, and so on). There thus may be a practical benefit, as well as a point of principle, in building alliances between academic workers and other workers whose conditions of autonomy are threatened. But these would not be easy alliances nor should they be ones which ignore the distinctive privilege that comes with academics' relative influence over symbolic production.³⁰

The role of post-neoliberal values in the university

What are the values underpinning our practices as researchers (and teachers) in the university that require defence against heteronomous measures such as 'impact'? Though the exact ways that values are embodied in knowledge vary across disciplinary areas, whatever our discipline we must recognise neoliberal discourse's common transformation of the university and other professional sectors in the UK and elsewhere. In a recent book,³¹ I have tried to articulate some of the values in terms of which resistance to neoliberal discourse – what Wendy Brown calls a 'counter-rationality' to neoliberalism - might be built.³² The core value I identify is 'voice': the act of valuing, and choosing to value, those frameworks for organizing human life and resources that themselves value voice (as a process). By voice as a process, I mean the embodied process of giving an account of one's life and its conditions, what Judith Butler³³ has called 'giving an account of oneself'. That argument developed elsewhere about voice was not formulated with the conditions of the university in mind, but let me explore briefly how it might apply here.

In sociological research, which is where broadly I locate my own work, voice as a value translates into foregrounding attention to how voice as a process is reproduced and deformed in the wider world (through what I have called ‘sociologies of voice’).³⁴ Such attention to voice is inseparable from two other things: a need to understand the wider material conditions in which voice occurs or does not (levels of inequality, structures of access to resources and power); and a need to register the complexities of individual and collective voice and the saturation of those complexities by the workings of power. When translated into research practice, voice would involve a certain quality of attention to the structures of the world we share and the voices within it. This guiding orientation is precisely *not* reducible to producing work that fits neatly with the self-perceived interests of institutional actors (measurable ‘impacts’); it is a *reflexive* value that connects with the wider role of pedagogy in helping ‘students come to terms with their own power as critical agents’.³⁵

The current crisis of the university in the UK certainly presents opportunities to develop new types of practice that resist neoliberal values, quite simply, by acting differently. One example is the NYLON doctoral students network formed by Richard Sennett at the London School of Economics and Craig Calhoun at New York University to which I have contributed since 2002.³⁶ This network is built on regular sessions and annual conferences where graduate students present their work and field data for close reading by peers and a small group of faculty. NYLON values the craft of fieldwork: it brackets out the increasingly instrumental reshaping of research within the academy. Such examples will never simply be reducible to general values.

Let us not forget however the underlying point: what is at stake in such examples is the ability of research to offer an independent and open view on the world. Neoliberalism is not just, or even primarily, an epochal shift in techniques of governmentality; it is a specific

and contestable ideology of action that prioritizes market-based values over other values.³⁷

Here an essay by journalist and holder of a PhD in biology, Barbara Ehrenreich, well known for pioneering work on contemporary US labour conditions, provides inspiration. After discussing what she practically needs from academics, she comments:

I come to sociology not only as a journalist-slash-consumer seeking quick answers . . . I also approach sociology as a kind of social thinker myself . . . When I approach sociology from this vantage point, I am looking for something I can only call companionship: other people who are, like me, trying to understand what the hell is going on here, in the society or societies we find ourselves embedded in.³⁸

Her bold attitude towards established disciplinary boundaries is completely incompatible with the regulatory framework for research to which we are becoming used in the UK:

A question-driven discipline, as opposed to a mere chunk of academic turf, must reach out to other disciplines. When the question drives the researcher, it may propel the researchers in surprising directions. I am not talking about being merely “interdisciplinary”; I am talking about *a complete disregard for the disciplinary boundaries* laid out in the early twentieth century a sociology, or least a public sociology, that is more like journalism – willing to go anywhere in pursuit of answers’.³⁹ I like the sense of adventure and urgency that informs Ehrenreich’s words and work. She captures better than many others why I became an academic. When in future years we look back at today, Ehrenreich may prove to have captured well the quality of research-focussed attention that we are, in our wider battles, fighting to retain.

Postscript

The Conservative-Liberal coalition government that succeeded New Labour after the May 2010 election has delayed implementation of REF by one year without changing its principles. Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business with ultimate responsibility for universities, announced in September 2010 that scientists 'should abandon work that was "neither commercially useful nor theoretically outstanding"' (quoted *Guardian* 9 September 2010). The practical implications are as yet unclear.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Engin Isin, Vicki Mayer and Joanna Zylińska for comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

¹ William Fulbright, 'The War and its Effects: The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex', in H. Schiller (ed) *Super-State: Readings in the Military-Industrial Complex* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1970), quoted Henry Giroux *The University in Chains* (Boulder, CO. : Paradigm, 2007), p. 15.

² See on market pressures elsewhere Michael Burawoy 'For Public Sociology', *American Sociological Review* 70: 4-28 (2005), at p. 7 and the special edition (volume 10(2)) of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* devoted to 'Neoliberal conditions of knowledge'.

³ This paper offers my views alone, not those of my department or institution.

⁴ Judith Stacey 'If I were the Goddess of sociological things' in Dan Clawson et al. (eds) *Public Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 91-107, at pp. 93-96; Andrew Abbott 'For Humanistic Sociology' in Clawson (2007), 195-209, at p 206.

⁵ HEFCE *Research Excellence Framework: Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research* (Bristol, 2009), September.

⁶ HEFCE (2009), at para 26 (added emphasis)

⁷ HEFCE (2009), para 53b (added emphasis)

⁸ HEFCE (2009), para 24.

⁹ HEFCE (2009), para 26.

¹⁰ HEFCE (2009), para 27a.

¹¹ Burawoy (2005), at p. 24

¹² Ulrich Beck 'The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity', *British Journal of Sociology* 51(1): 79-105 (2000); John Urry *Sociology Beyond Societies* (London: Sage, 2001).

¹³ See Greg Hearn, Jo Tacchi, Marcus Foth and June Lennie (2009) *Action Research and New Media* (Cresskill NJ: The Hampton Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Max Weber 'Science as a Vocation' in H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills *From Max Weber* 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1991, originally published 1920), 129-158

¹⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

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- ¹⁶ Clawson (2007).
- ¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).
- ¹⁸ See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/communicate/e-petitions>
- ¹⁹ See respectively Marcia Angell 'Drug Companies & Doctors: A Story of Corruption', *New York Review of Books* 15 January 2009, 8-12, and the books cited by her; and Henry Giroux *The University in Chains* (Boulder, CO. : Paradigm, 2007)
- ²⁰ Dept for Business Innovation & Skills *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, (November 2009), 10.
- ²¹ *Higher Ambitions*, 1, 18; compare Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ²² Andrew Ross 'The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?', *Theory Culture & Society* 25(7-8): 31-39 (2008).
- ²³ Roz Gill and Andy Pratt 'In the Social Factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work', *Theory Culture & Society* 25(7-8): 1-30 (2008), at p. 16. The best and most focussed analysis is offered by Henry Giroux (2007).
- ²⁴ Richard Sennett *The Corrosion of Character* (New York: Norton, 1998).
- ²⁵ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
- ²⁶ I put 'us' in scare quotes to underline the point that any academic alliances formed in such circumstances are themselves affected by divisions of labour shaped by the very same processes.
- ²⁷ Jose Saramago *Seeing* (London: Vintage, 2007), at p. 268 [originally published in Portuguese 2004].
- ²⁸ Samuel Beckett *The Unnamable* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1975), at p. 8.
- ²⁹ A number of essays in Clawson (2007) make this point well.
- ³⁰ See Ross (2008).
- ³¹ N. Couldry *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010).
- ³² Wendy Brown 'Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', *Theory & Event* 7(1): 1-23 (2003) at para 42.
- ³³ Judith Butler *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
- ³⁴ Couldry (2010), chapter 6
- ³⁵ Giroux (2007), 180.
- ³⁶ See <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nylon/about.html>
- ³⁷ In this respect I prefer Mitchell Dean's reading of Foucault's work on governmentality to Nikolas Rose's: see Mitchell Dean *Governing Societies* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2007), especially pp. 84-88, Rose, *Powers of Freedom*; Michel Foucault *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).
- ³⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich 'A Journalist's Plea', in Clawson (2007), 231-240, at p. 235.
- ³⁹ Ehrenreich (2007), 236, added emphasis and 238.