

DOMINIC BOYER

‘What is driving university reform in the age of globalization?’

I

The critical narrative we often hear about current institutional reforms of higher education is that, regardless of where they are taking place and what flag they are flying, they have a singular objective: to dissipate organizational and collegial autonomy in order to better saturate the university field with market-oriented principles (e.g. knowledge as commodity, faculty as wage labour, administration as management, student body as consumer public, university as marketplace). I don't think anyone could seriously deny that these principles have become centralised and normalised in contemporary higher education. This special issue provides an impressive series of snapshots of educational neoliberalism-in-action, a phenomenon, which, as the articles amply testify, has become near-global in its political reach and institutional effects since the 1980s. But one also wonders who or what lies behind this reform wave. The question is not trivial since if we cannot locate some source of individual, collective or structural agency for the neoliberal reform of higher education, if we cannot locate pressure points of transformation, then can we truly expect our critical and analytical labours to be something more than chronicles of metamorphosis and decline?

Although ‘who’s’ abound and are easily named in individual organizations, a global class of ‘who’s’ is more difficult to identify. If we were to look solely at the case of the United States, we could perhaps persuasively localise blame in the figure of the university trustee. American university trustees typically are responsible for electing university presidents (who remain accountable to them), for high-level fund-raising, influence-peddling and networking on the university's behalf, and, although always elite, in the post-war period they have increasingly been recruited from the ranks of the business elite in order to satisfy ever-spiralling demands for private donations (even at nominally ‘public’ universities) to build infrastructure, to offset faculty salaries, to purchase expensive scientific equipment, and to offer financial aid that modestly insulates student populations from equally spiralling tuition costs. University trustees are usually personally very wealthy and highly educated and they represent both American mainstream political parties in significant numbers. Their social networks are elite, business-friendly, and their public discourse typically invokes what we could describe as the liberal triad of individuality, family/community and markets as the appropriate pillars of civilised sociability. Like all of us, trustees are ideological creatures whose practical intuitions become their truths and their own saturation by their daily

involvement with market-centred institutions and ideas leads them to conclude that these institutions and ideas are good for the rest of society as well. To shorten this story, if we asked ourselves who might be pushing the reform of American universities into more market-susceptible institutions, we could easily suspect that the trail would eventually lead back to the secret agency of the trustees, working behind the scenes to make universities into institutions more recognizable (and accountable) to their own social principles.

Personal influence, especially elite personal influence, is undoubtedly too often underestimated in social analysis. But, even without doubting or exculpating the hidden agency of American university trustees, the essays in this special issue show that we need structural and historical analysis as well. What is so striking about the juxtaposition of the cases of university reform in Italy, New Zealand, Serbia, and South Africa is that we have vastly different leadership structures and organizational hierarchies operating in different national (and supranational) political and policy environments that nonetheless all seem subject to a similar governmental pressure to (1) create internal markets of performance (or excellence), to (2) attune themselves to external markets of skills and knowledge, and to (3) finally erase the last vestiges of estate privilege, which university faculty inherited so long ago from the European nobility, in favour of an increasingly proletarianised civil servant status.

What might explain this harmonization of reform operations (and perhaps of intentions)? One argument would be discursive in the Foucaultian sense that modern discourses of institutional reform are structural and perpetual and function to extend governmental agencies, to elicit productive governmentalities among subjects of power, and to allow institutions to reproduce themselves across generations. Although the Foucaultian model surely illuminates the unholy biopolitical alliance of technocracy and marketization in university reform it also misses something about its scale and temporality. To understand the near-global and accelerating aspects of contemporary university reform, we also need to consider its historical context in *late-liberal* (e.g. *post-welfarist*) *statecraft*.

One also cannot emphasise enough the fundamentally *anxious* character of late liberal government. Late liberal states seek to govern polities and national economies under conditions in which long developing trends of the transnational mobilization of capital and labour have made the stabilization of revenue streams (the lifeblood of any state) increasingly difficult to guarantee. The effects of state anxiety in politics and policy are remarkably predictable when one looks across the world and like all good symptoms they are at least partly interchangeable with one another. Military intervention and police suppression have become standard techniques for late liberal states to domesticate mobility, to enhance nationalism and to secure new revenue. Political populism is another common effect, coming in leftist and rightist, secular and religious variants, but all of which mobilise faith in order to resist the erosion of mid-20th-century national welfarism. The embrace of open (e.g. transnational) competitive markets is a third phenomenon – perhaps the one most ubiquitously appearing since the 1980s – one that is justified by the logic that mobility can be harnessed and utilised to a state's own advantage. The embrace is typically a pathological one, however, since it disregards the fact that the growth of competitive transnational markets inevitably weakens the efficacy of the political technologies of nation-states to govern national polities and economies. Cris Shore's excellent analysis (this issue) of the accelerating treadmill of neoliberal reform expectations in New Zealand epitomises this latter

paradox. Universities are being placed in the ‘schizophrenic’ situation of being allegedly open and competitive marketplaces of knowledge that are yet subjected to increasing technocratic control to align research with the goal of generating new revenue forms for states and their allied corporate interests. All of this is done, of course, on the cheap given that late liberal states usually find themselves unwilling or unable to finance their own fantasies of dominance in a globally competitive knowledge economy. The paradox is, in my view, insurmountable and its pathologies seem destined to intensify. But, in the meanwhile, across the world we find late liberal states tenaciously leveraging pressure upon universities to deliver more for less and it is for this reason that contemporary university reform has come to resemble a movement in the Arendtian sense of a political entity that propels itself forward by continuously absorbing and transcending its own organizational forms (‘a movement . . . can only have a direction’, Arendt wrote, and ‘any form of . . . structure can be only a handicap to a movement which is being propelled with increasing speed in a certain direction’: 2004: 517–8).

What perhaps terrifies us faculty most about contemporary university reform is witnessing this autophagy in which each wave of reforms devours its predecessors and appears to be designed only to create the staging ground for the next. The bleaker portraits of the contemporary university-under-reform suggest that the momentum of this movement cannot now be arrested and that its inevitable destination is the constitution of the university as an industrial and post-political space. And, yet, implicitly at least, those of us who write critically on this topic must believe in the possibility of alternate futures. Thus the question must follow: On what basis do we believe in alternative futures for the university?

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ELIZABETH RATA

Response to Dominic Boyer

II

Dominic Boyer is right to ask about the source of agency and the pressure points of transformation if we are to further our understanding of university reform. The predictable story of ‘anarchic’ capitalism is the rise and re-grouping of elites in the constant scramble for profits, especially in times such as ours when those profits are contracting. To find the source of agency we need not only to look at international capital and identify the global class of ‘whos’, but also to look within the university itself.

Richard Lachmann’s (2000) elite conflict theory holds that the source of societal change occurs as an emergent elite enters into a new relationship with power. The

mechanism of the relationship is brokerage. I suggest that the brokerage of neoliberalism into the university by an emergent insider elite is the pressure point of transformation. Any analysis of agency must investigate what constitutes brokerage. What roles, functions and relationships are exercised by this emergent managerial class?

That class's genealogy is in what David Cannadine (2008) describes as unprecedented government support for a national university-based intellectual class in the post-war decades; an expense to global capitalism that it will no longer tolerate. As the squeeze reduces that intellectual class to 'proletarianised civil servant status' (Cannadine 2008: 6), a small group from amongst the ranks of senior managers and academics emerge to broker its own new relationship to the external business class. The very act of brokerage, of institutionalising neoliberal policies and practices in large and small ways, transforms this group into a comprador bourgeoisie, that is, a fraction who emerge as an elite by acting as intermediaries for external capital (Rata 2000; Poulantzas 1976). Here, within the corporatised university, those individuals who occupy the brokerage roles then become an elite-for-itself. It has its own desires and ambitions, and they are self-interested and individualised, not public and progressive.

It is unsurprising that the latest of capitalism's emergent elites is to be found in the university. It is one of the central institutions in contemporary capitalism that global corporate interests need in order to secure positional advantage in developing the new 'business' of academia. The university's strategic importance to corporate business lies in three areas: It is where the latest and most valuable resource, 'knowledge' is created. It is where the knowledge resource is commodified and placed into the global knowledge market. And of equal importance, the corporatised university is where the ideology of the knowledge market is created and maintained. The university produces its own hegemonic discourses.

The local experience of university neoliberalisation differs in degree but not in kind as the excellent accounts of Serbia, Italy, South Africa, and New Zealand in this volume show. Everywhere brokerage involves institutionalising the compliance and audit culture of new public management. But, the compradors themselves have a local colour. Their class interests are materialised from their own histories and their success at brokerage relies on exploiting those histories.

Dominic Boyer refers to the role of university trustees in the United States, an historical role but now with greater influence. In South Africa, Bjarke Oxlund discusses how the neoliberal subjectivities of local agents of brokerage are developed in the historically disadvantaged institutions, a necessary pre-condition for their engagement with external neoliberal forces. Jana Bacevic uses the example of the Serbian students to show the role of discursive action in the brokerage of neoliberalism. The ambiguous and contradictory nature of the students' discourse rendered it impotent in the face of a neoliberal discourse backed by economic power.

To reveal the hidden agency we need to analyse the specific political and social functions of the emergent intellectual elite. This includes identifying the personal influence of individuals and groups, a task requiring what Angelo Romano describes as an *anthropology of home*. But the deeper question is how do those roles and functions alter academic social relations? Collegial relations structure the humanist university and produce very different power relationships from the employer – employee contract of the neoliberal university.

In identifying the source and function of agency it is to social relations that we need to look. Two sets of power relationships tell us something about brokerage

agents. One is the relationship between the university compradors and the external corporates. The second set of relationships is inside the institution: on the one side the compradors whose functions as employers and managers of academic life transform them into an elite and, on the managed side, those academics who are regulated by the policies and practices of compliance and audit. It is in the exercise of management that neoliberal structures take hold. Although structure and agency are conceptualised separately, they act interdependently as one force. Spinoza's idea of process as structure in motion (that is, 'all motion is inherent in matter' (Israel 2001: 234) is useful in explaining transformation. The structural positions authorise the exercise of power but it is people who exercise power, and in doing so, solidify the process into structure.

The neoliberal university is a new social world, one where, in Jonathan Friedman's description, 'power is converted into authority and the latter into forms of socialisation; the formation of subjects and of subjective experience' (2000: 645).

Dominic Boyer paints a bleak vision of this post-political space. It is indeed Cris Shore's 'schizophrenic' monster in danger of devouring itself. Given my analysis of the deep structural transformation that brokerage creates, there seems a frightening inevitability to the replacement of the humanist university by a corporate business producing knowledge for sale in the global market of commodities. So how can I, with any optimism, address Boyer's question: 'On what basis so we believe in alternative futures for the university?' The pathology of schizophrenia does not have a happy ending. But is not a fatalistic pessimism part of that pathology? To conclude with fatalism is to comply with that pessimism.

Can there be a degree of optimism for an alternative future? Perhaps that optimism lies in the paradox of knowledge itself; the source of both the pathology and the creativity of the university. In order to become a capitalisable resource knowledge needs to be created. But that act of creation is uncommodifiable. Indeed 'commodified creativity' is impossible. One destroys the other.

Can we have reached the end of the project of liberal education, with only a post-liberal anxiety left, while the creativity, independence and risk-taking of critical scholarship still happens? The very fact that we engage in critical scholarship challenges such pessimism. Is critical scholarship itself the challenge to increasing illiberality? A naïve position perhaps but that is to forget the power of critical scholarship, something that scholars of the early liberal period did not forget. For them, that very act of critical scholarship, with its creativity, independence, and risk-taking, was the university.

Has 'knowledge is power' been hijacked so completely as the so-called knowledge economy's 'brand' that we forget that Francis Bacon actually meant those words. The activity of scholars in collegial social relations, not the administration, is the humanist university. It is academics, who, in taking for granted this fundamental character of the university, pose as great a danger as does the brokerage of neoliberalism. This makes Shore's analysis of their changing subjectivity a crucial area for investigation. And such investigation itself challenges the 'illness' because the act of critical scholarship is a progressive creative force. Even to ask if the university is pathologically unwell is an act of health. The critical scholarship about university reform, to which this volume contributes, is that action. Agency occurs when people act. Its opposite, stasis, is the condition of late liberalism's anxiety. My response to Dominic Boyer's very disturbing question is to ask if the act of critical scholarship itself offers an alternative future.

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DOMINIC BOYER

Response to Elizabeth Rata

III

Elizabeth Rata wisely observes that some of the bleaker visions of the neoliberal university-under-reform double as convenient excuses for inaction. But she might agree that one can also overestimate critical scholarship's potential to resist or counteract the structural assault that we faculty face in the context of late liberal university reform. I am certain that Elizabeth and I agree that we need to grasp the entire political ecology of the contemporary university to create interventions that will succeed. I view Elizabeth's 'anthropology of home' as an essential element of this grasping and it will surely extend and improve the project of reflexive social and political analysis that began with Marx. In the spirit of healthy provocation, let me close with two reasons for concern and two reasons for hope about how far critical scholarship can take us in terms of forestalling or defeating the rise of a post-political university.

The first cause for concern is that the post-political conceits of contemporary university reform reflect late liberal political subjectivities more generally. (Neo)Liberalism is such bedrock intuition in so many governments and polities that it is currently very difficult to find a persuasive public language with which to delegitimize contemporary university reform and its narrative of emancipation through marketization. Faith in alternatives is minimal and in the United States anyway, neither Saint Obama nor the global financial crisis have shifted the terms of political debate substantially. Liberalism, in my view, does not belong to the domain of communicative reason; it can't be challenged at the level of ideas and discourse alone. As in my example of the trustees above, liberalism has ideological anchorage in certain aspects of modern social experience and the dilemma that faces critical scholarship is that the ideological 'naturalness' of those experiences must first be disrupted in order to delegitimize the dominant premises of university reform.

Secondly, it concerns but does not surprise me that the university is not speaking with a collective voice against the contemporary reform movement. Among the three estates of the university (administrators, faculty, students), the faculty is the estate

that has experienced the deepest erosion of autonomy under the current reforms. But we often find ourselves isolated in our criticism. Students, one could argue, stand to enhance their social power with their new image as sovereign consumers. Bacevic's and Oxlund's articles reveal the estate self-interest of student protest and student activists' willingness to strike compromises with university reformers at other estates' expense. As Romano's and Shore's articles show, administrators are meanwhile happy to cement their hegemony within universities as neoliberal states and their education ministries increase faculty workloads and degrade faculty autonomy.

Elizabeth expresses meanwhile my first reason for hope very well: the romantic but by no means therefore untrue proposition that the critical reasoning and analytical creativity which are the enduring hallmarks of the best work done within the university field never coexist easily with state and market powers. Knowledge, for example, is only imperfectly commodifiable, at best an 'as if' commodity always vulnerable to being undone by its own polysemic semiotic basis, no matter how much effort is exerted to materialise it in thing-like ways. The 'knowledge economy' is in its essence a fantasy albeit a highly institutionalised and powerful one.

The second reason for hope is that there is no 'ism' in neoliberalism. Few seem to recall these days that Marx had next to nothing to say about capitalISM in his writings. He wrote instead about 'capital' which for him meant both the essential relation of a bourgeois-dominated society and the alienated forms of human labour constituted by monetarised marketised exchange. Marx viewed the forms of capital as intrinsically fluid, dynamic, historical and susceptible to transformation. But I doubt he believed that anything as monolithic as 'capitalism' existed. Perhaps the worst injustice critical scholarship does to itself these days is to begin with categories like 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' which, however useful and necessary glosses they are for narrative purposes, are analytically dangerous in that they bestow an undeserved systematicity upon current trends and relations. Once invoked, such 'isms' also make it very difficult to imagine that the individual critic or even a network of critics can do much to intervene in, let alone disrupt, them.

So, let's give up our isms and instead rethink, from the ground up, what – like Elizabeth's university compradors – an ethnography of contemporary relations and forms of capital in the field of higher education needs to take into account. And let's remind ourselves that all of these forms and relations are susceptible to transformation and *will* transform historically, if not exactly as we please.

ELIZABETH RATA

Response to Dominic Boyer

IV

There is no doubt that Dominic and I agree on the importance of identifying the source of transformative agency if we are to understand contemporary higher education

reforms. We both recognise how combining 'on the ground' ethnography with the 'eye in the sky' theoretical tools of political economy enables us to grasp the ecology of the university. To Dominic's caution about reifying the 'isms' I would add a vigilance against using teleological explanations of transformation. Those explanations enable the reified 'neoliberalism' to be envisaged as an inevitable and relentless march through the people, policies and institutions of higher education.

However there is a point of disagreement: Dominic's goal – 'to create interventions that will succeed'. I have been long troubled by the interpretation of praxis as the inclusion of the researcher's own politics into research. This may be the result of a tendency to conflate 'critical thinking' and 'critical theory' in my first disciplinary home, the sociology of education. In that discipline, a 'redemptive' approach has dominated over an 'enquiry' approach since the 1970s (Dale 2001). In the former, the discipline serves as a 'resource' to critical theory's emancipatory goal with the researcher's political purpose (made explicit or not) determining the goals of the research. The enquiry approach, on the other hand, views education as a 'topic' or 'object of enquiry' to be critically examined (Meyer, cited in Dale 2001: 9).

The 'unproblematic and rarely questioned goal' of the redemptive approach (Dale 2001: 9) is at the heart of my difficulties in this debate. It is my view that, at the point where the research is undertaken as a resource to a political goal or intervention with the researcher acting as a political agent for that goal, the critical distance and the reflexive social and political analysis required for an anthropology of home is seriously compromised. This nervousness comes from my own experience as an analyst of New Zealand's cultural politics which has shown me that politically driven research is not always progressive. There, I argue, the use of a critical theory discourse of social justice by Maori intellectual activists has contributed to obfuscating the collusion between the privatisation programmes of tribal economic corporations and other neoliberal interests.

In contrast to a redemptive approach, critical enquiry involves finding and using the Archimedean point (Shore and Wright 1998) outside the system that enables us to establish a critical distance. In metaphorically stepping back from the ethnographic findings, in other words, in creating the distance by using theory to explain the 'why' of the investigated social and political phenomena, the researcher can engage in reflexive analysis required for critical thinking. I am not saying that the researcher is impartial in doing this, but I am saying that the critical distance does make the research objective. (I draw on Bunge's (1999: xi) distinction between objectivity as a philosophical category and impartiality as a moral and political category here.) In addition, the methodology used in creating critical distance by employing theoretical approaches drawn from various intellectual traditions is made explicit, and is therefore, available for critique.

In my view praxis occurs, not in the use of scholarship for a political goal, but in the use of the scholarship as the means of critical enquiry. While ethnographic studies enable us to investigate specific actors, actions, and language in the university, it is the researcher's choice of intellectual heritage that is used to explain how those actors, actions and language materialise the class interests of neoliberal elites. When J. S. Mill observed that 'wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests and its feelings of class superiority (Mill 1985: 65), the superiority he referred to might equally describe the normative claims of contemporary university neoliberals. This hegemonic 'superiority' attempts to foreclose other understandings of higher education reforms. Anthropological inquiry and critique

can break through those normative claims by problematising them. But in my opinion it can only do so if the critique plays by different rules to those of its participants – that is, by observing critical distance, establishing the object of enquiry, and making explicit the relationship between the researcher and the object being investigated.

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