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RESPONSE

The boiled frog and the dodo

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Introduction

In his excellent 'What's happening to our universities?' proposition paper, Ben R. Martin cogently and persuasively outlines some of the key changes that have happened in the last few decades to the higher education sector worldwide. These changes, he rightly argues, have had a cumulatively corrosive effect. Had they been proposed all at once, as a single 'reform', they would have been rejected, for it would have been obvious that their effect would be damaging, and perhaps even terminal, for the form and function of higher education. Any government that proposed such a revolution would surely have been ridiculed, its authority shot to pieces.

Stefan Collini has been clear on this. In October 2013, he argued that:

> Future historians, pondering changes in British society from the 1980s onwards, will struggle to account for the following curious fact. Although British business enterprises have an extremely mixed record (frequently posting gigantic losses, mostly failing to match overseas competitors, scarcely benefiting the weaker groups in society), and although such arm's length public institutions as museums and galleries, the BBC and the universities have by and large a very good record (universally acknowledged creativity, streets ahead of most of their international peers, positive forces for human development and social cohesion), nonetheless over the past three decades politicians have repeatedly attempted to force the second set of institutions to change so that they more closely resemble the first. Some of those historians may even wonder why at the time there was so little concerted protest at this deeply implausible programme. But they will at least record that, alongside its many other achievements, the coalition government took the decisive steps in helping to turn some first-rate universities into third-rate companies. (Collini, 2013)

Yet the changes have happened thanks to the phenomenon of 'the boiled frog', outlined so adeptly by Ben Martin: drop a frog into boiling water, and it will jump out; leave it in gently warming water that eventually comes to the boil and it will sleepwalk its way to its own extinction. It sounds extreme to suggest that the university faces extinction; yet, as we have seen in the 2015 Green Paper, the present UK government envisages the strong likelihood that some institutions will close (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). What the Green Paper fails to acknowledge, though, is that, despite the envisaged influx of 'new providers' in the competitive marketplace of higher education, we actually face a more general predicament. The name and title of 'university' will flourish, with additional 'new providers'; but the form and function will have so changed that the institutions that

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retain the title will, in many cases, no longer have any substantive and proper claim to the title. They will be universities in name only. The boiled frog will go the way of the dodo.

As that last sentence suggests, I want here to accept and also to extend the logic of Martin's paper. At the heart of my argument is a focus on the nature of change as such, and how it is brought about and managed in the contemporary sector. Linked to this is a consideration of who is responsible for boiling the frog – or, in my extended argument, for threatening a situation where we have universities in name but not in substance. This requires a brief introductory consideration of the logic of incrementalist change in modern institutional management. The first key element is that the principle of constant change is mediated by our institutional management as inherently good, and is presented as either 'innovation' or 'modernisation', neither of which is to be reasonably resisted in a university that is looking to its future survival and well-being. 'Change management' is now of the essence in management. Each change is ostensibly quite small: irritating, perhaps, but hardly worth staffing the barricades in resistance. An extra question on an already heavily bureaucratic form? Well, sigh, OK. Another? Oh, well, grudgingly, OK. In any case, change as such is intrinsically good: modern, innovative. Resistance, therefore, is negative and reactionary.

But this is attritional: in time, the sum of changes has transformed the initial ground or principle beyond what we want to accept. Substantive change has been brought about by the series of small and unchallenged – unresisted – minor modifications. Now, we boiling frogs are in a seriously untenable position. Having accepted the minor modifications, we find ourselves utterly complicit with the major change and the new state of affairs. There is no logical ground at this point to resist something that, had we seen it all at once, we would certainly have rejected. We are now part of the problem that we had hoped initially to solve, or to avoid bringing into being. This is why academics have been so 'quiet and meekly acquiescent' in the face of this predicament. There is at least one thing that needs to be added to Martin's consideration: if we have a boiled frog, then who is doing the boiling here? The boiling is not some naturally occurring phenomenon; rather, there is a chef somewhere who is turning up the heat, initiating each stage of those minor modifications that have become so disastrous.

Counter-intuitively, however, these changes are not the real issue. The real issue is that the university is increasingly conditioned by a stultifying conformity, an acquiescence in 'things as they are'. The chef, in this case, is either government or an undifferentiated 'business'; and the university is required to conform to whatever it is that government and business call 'reality' and 'the real world'. As Collini has indicated, though, we have good grounds for doubting their credentials; and my case here is that we face effective extinction unless we challenge their claims upon the real world. Is it not our role, in some fundamental way, to contribute to the making of that real world? In short, the ostensible changes of the last four decades are but a cover for the fact that the university is not being allowed to play its authoritative role in the making of history, and is instead being relegated – feudal style – to a position of servile acquiescence to a failing lord.

The failing lord is the lord of commerce, which now establishes the priorities for all social and political existence. If it cannot be priced and sold, it isn't real, or it enjoys no legitimacy. Our institutional task has become one whereby we are always in catch-up mode, and the changes imposed on us are there simply to allow for the continued prioritization of the realities of commerce. It is worth pointing out, in passing, that this becomes menacing

when the interests of government become more or less fully identified with those of business (see Soros, 2000).

There are four sections to my argument. First, I outline the fundamentals of new public management in terms of a cynicism that constitutes the philosophy of managerialist fundamentalism. Second, I outline the politics of this cynicism, and identify our condition with Soviet-style planning – including the current non-ironical prevalence of five-year plans that operate in most institutions; but I push the logic of this a little further than does Martin, and find an 'everyday Stalinism' which has serious repercussions for our academic practices, and which is partly responsible for converting academic freedom into academic feudalism. Third, I argue that this brings about the intellectual evisceration of the institution: our work is emptied of content and we become purely formal functionaries of, and functions in, a system that has no real purpose other than maintaining itself upright and in circulation. Further, I identify the kind of circulation in question as financial: the university now exists primarily for the purposes of circulating money, and we measure its success in terms of the growth of turnover. Success now means, quite simply, greater turnover year-on-year; and this success is rewarded by massive increases in executive pay, as if the turnover in question is substantially positive for a society when, in fact, it is vacuous: money for the sake of money, circulation for the sake of circulation.

Finally, I outline the stakes of the position where our primary purpose is, indeed, nothing less than the survival of the university as a viable institution. If we are not careful, we may maintain the form and semblance of a surviving institution, but the entirety of our purpose – our DNA, if you will – will have changed to the point where there is really no further point in surviving at all. We therefore have to change the chef and the recipe. Save the frog, not just for the frog's sake, but for the sake of the entire ecosystem that requires its survival.

Managerialist fundamentalism as institutionalized cynicism

Martin shows how universities have been adopting a hierarchical approach to their organizational and other structures. We could suggest that the sector is somewhat behind the times, following the business model that it was enjoined to do over many decades, but some four decades behind the curve.[1] But this is too generous. In fact, it suits the current ideology of higher education for senior managers to operate in this way, for it gives management maximum control with minimum responsibility. The structure in question can be easily summed up: it is management as the delegation of blame.

This is a key determinant and characteristic of all new public management (hereafter NPM), in fact. NPM works through the radical atomization of activity: the simplest procedure is broken down into constituent elements or parts, and for every element, further layers of (usually unnecessary) activity are inserted (see Gruening, 2001). In its determination to be 'robust', NPM sees anything that is non-instrumentalized and non-mechanized as amateurish; and it prefers a specious professionalism, supposedly guaranteed by an analysis and corresponding measurement of the mechanics of every transaction.

Academics can probably all recall the first stirrings of this as it afflicted their actual work, in teaching, for example. The first thing that NPM does here is demand verifiable proof that teaching is actually happening; and, to do this, it has to fracture the organic unity of a relation between student and teacher, and mechanize it. We no longer teach; rather, we 'deliver'

an entity or product called 'teaching' or 'the student experience', which can be broken into multiple elements. The same thing happens elsewhere in the public sector, where the actual substantive and expert activity of employees is eliminated, to be replaced by commodities: verbs replaced by nouns. Nurses, for a further example, no longer 'care'; rather, they deliver a 'care package'. This is part of the privatization agenda, which requires that organic and therefore unstable activities become stabilized as commercial commodities, available for purchase and private ownership.[2]

This – the transformation of organic and living activity into mechanical procedure and 'robotization' – is fundamental. In such a transformation, NPM will break the activity down into constituents that can all be isolated one from the other, individually tested, and separately measured by fragmented sets of criteria. What did you tell the student you would teach before teaching it? How did you break the task down into separate and identifiable stages? How did you measure the success of each stage? How did you test whether the student had learned what you had taught at each of those stages? How did you check that the required progress was made? Did you remember to tell the student that you had now taught what you said you would teach? And did you test her or his understanding of that fact? And so on in all its many variants.

Each stage in this process must now be managed, because each stage will have its own verifiability procedures and possibilities for further modification (or insertion of yet more atomized elements into the activity). Because each instant of the activity can now be measured and *quantified*, the very *quality* of what goes on is now put into a second order of importance; and we all start working to address the systems and procedures or quantifiable processes, rather than keeping an eye on the fundamental quality of the organic activity. Quality is now trumped by quantification; and so we need a further new bureaucracy of 'quality assurance', which will continue this process inexorably and exponentially. The more we attend to 'quality assurance', the more it is the case that quality itself disappears, to be replaced by quantification. Hence the need for yet more quality assurance, and so on and on. And quantities are more easily and 'transparently' managed than qualities.

Atomization of our activity ensures that it is difficult to identify the power within an institution with the authority that governs its practices and gives meaning to its work. There is now a huge divergence between authority and power in the university in our time. If tasks are always delegated, to the point where it becomes difficult to see the macro-structure in the face of the multiplying micro-structures that shape our work, then it follows that the individual who holds power at the macro-level is set at a remove from the daily micro-level activities. This is the real meaning of a hierarchical organization under NPM. The logic here is that the people at the top of an institution accept no actual responsibility for the system over which they preside. Yet, they retain the power to preside. If a fault arises, that fault is delegated downwards, to the colleague working at the micro-level, even though she or he is working under the aegis of the individuals who hold the relevant and determining power.[3] The vice chancellor can then hide behind strategy, policy and procedures; but the power that is thereby retained lacks legitimacy, and lacks authority.

In the end, no one can ever be held responsible for things in this NPM system, for blame can always be delegated further and further down the chain – eventually falling into the lap of the individual who raises any complaint. It becomes the plaintiff's own fault.[4] In Martin's analogy, there is no chef boiling the frog, yet the heat is on nonetheless; and if the frog is being boiled, it is partly its own fault. As Martin indicates, we have often been

too acquiescent in our own degradation; or as Collini (2013) has it, future historians will wonder why we didn't kick up a fuss. Atomization, the delegation of blame and hierarchical power-without-authority are the key explanatory factors.

The result of all this is unremittingly bad. It creates a fissure between the 'official' university (where senior managers live) and the 'clandestine' institution (where actual work is done) (Docherty, 2015). The only way to heal this wound is through the re-engagement of more democratic structures, not just in the institution, but also in our society as a whole, a society that is itself increasingly 'managed'. The defenders of NPM hierarchy argue that democracy is awkward and slow, and that it does not allow for the flexibility of response that is needed in our supposedly 'fast-changing environment'.[5] Yet, the disappearance of democracy has had seriously deleterious effects. The worst of these is that input into decision-making is extremely limited; and people feel – and are – deprived of authority and denied autonomy.

The consequences are serious, institutionally and socially. Power becomes brazen, finding justifications for its actions from within its own clique. The Russell Group is one such clique. It seeks to exert power, but feels no need to authorize this power from within its own constituency. The diagnosis of this, though, reveals yet more troubling issues. Lacking serious socio-cultural authority, Russell Group and other vice chancellors turn inwards to exert power instead. Having delegated blame, it follows that management must now deal primarily with failure; and, in this way, management bleeds into discipline and becomes synonymous with it. This then furthers the division between managers and the rest: it is as if the workforce is somehow inadequate, structurally and intrinsically, to the norms of the leadership. In the larger political sphere, 'the people' are inadequate to the vision of the president. The damage to community – to *collegium* – is extreme.

Specifically, in our institutions, performance reviews, for example, are increasingly focused on what colleagues have failed to do rather than on what they have achieved: not raised enough money, not published enough, not published in the right places, not taken on extra admin duties, not secured enough first-class degrees, not raised enough money, not raised enough money, not raised enough money. And so on.[6]

In this disciplinary/regulatory mode, management now concentrates on the policing of the individual institutional brand. A brand is like a personal signature: it indicates ownership and power. Those carrying the brand are the property of the owner who brands them. In universities, the brand is given by the key performance indicators that govern league table standings. Yet, these figures are always subject to manipulative management. Consequently, statistics are wilfully misread or massaged to ensure that every institution is excellent, world-leading, world-beating and global. Management becomes a cynical exercise in generating misinformation; and, given that this becomes one of the primary reasons for management's importance in an institution, it percolates everywhere. In the end, management provides a model for students too: essentially managerial cynicism here becomes the model for all teaching, which is endangered and driven towards becoming nothing more than the management of information.

What better word exists to describe this entire managerial phenomenon, then, than 'cynicism'? NPM is founded upon a fundamental mistrust of the human beings who are to be managed under its aegis. That is why our every move is to be measured, justified and reduced to interchangeable commodified quantities. Once eviscerated in this way, humans become mere resources and, like the stationery cupboard, can be subjected to management.

NPM is contemptuous of any moment of idleness within the system; and, like the classical cynic, NPM is therefore also contemptuous of anything that smacks of ease – such as taking time to work out the best democratic decisions, for example. NPM is cynically suspicious of sincerity, for the sincerity and authenticity with which students learn, teachers teach and researchers make discoveries cannot be measured and quantified as such. Sincerity is thus mis-mediated by NPM as results or outcomes, and its human constituent eliminated.

To attack trust and democracy in these ways is also to attack some fundamental principles of the university, among them the academic freedom that could form the basis of a much wider social concern for a more general form of social liberation, which we might characterize here as the extension and expansion of the range of human possibilities. Yet that, of course, is one of the fundamental reasons for the university's research existence. NPM cynicism damages the very core of academic endeavour, and has damaging consequences for the public good that academics could otherwise serve more fully. As this reference to the social world implies, there is a politics to this.

Everyday Stalinism; or academic feudalism

Cynicism becomes institutionalized, and both academic staff and students internalize its norms: everything is now subject to management, and its compliant availability for management as such is what constitutes its substantive reality. There is a specific political structure to this kind of compliance, a compliance that always veers into overdrive as servile over-compliance. The ideological claim is that NPM managers are not authoritarian; and they are wary of appearing to exercise brute power. This is the piety behind the cynicism. They will not necessarily say what they would like to see happen, but – in the logic of incrementalism – will simply drop hints about the general direction of travel. It is for the apparatchik then to exceed the unstated demand.

The term 'apparatchik' is controversial, but correct because this is a routinized, everyday Stalinism, a leadership form that is modelled on a Soviet-style policing of activity (see Docherty, 2011). This looks extreme: no one is being sent to work in labour camps. This is not the point here, and I do not intend to demean the horrors of life under Stalin by this comparison. What I do intend is to reveal that there is an authoritarian politics that breeds authoritarianism and spying or surveillance as an everyday mode of personal relations and life in our institutions.

Žižek (2003, pp.105–11) indicates that Stalinism operated according to a management principle that was both hierarchical and centralized – rather like my depiction of NPM above. There is what Žižek refers to as a 'strictly centralized system of command'; yet, paradoxically, commands were themselves often absent. Stalin preferred simply to give various signals of his thinking, following which the enthusiastic cadres would exceed whatever they took to be the meaning of the signal in the attempt to curry favour (and, sometimes, of course, to stay alive). Stalin thereby absolves himself of responsibility for things carried out in response to his signals: he gave no orders. In fact, orders as such become unnecessary: once the general direction of travel is established, the cadres jockey for position and for preferment by exceeding what is required.

With the loss of any serious autonomy that this structure entails, we also start to lose the foundational principles of academic freedom. In our time, academic freedom is under threat like never before. Above all, in a condition of everyday authoritarian Stalinism such as we

have it, we are less likely than ever before to risk criticizing our institution, its managers and leaders, or the general direction of ideological travel on which they have set us off. To propose that there may be an alternative is to be at odds with the smooth operation of the organization, to be disruptive, to be 'unmanageable'.

There have been numerous cases, worldwide, of academics being silenced. In some jurisdictions, this is extremely serious: colleagues are jailed in countries as various as Turkey, China and Iran, and many have faced prosecution in many other places, including in such other democratic states as Germany and Italy. Students have been attacked in India and have been tortured in Egypt.[7] More commonly, academics do not risk their freedom or lives when they disrupt the smooth operation of their institutional ideologies by daring to think and talk for themselves; rather, they risk only their jobs and livelihoods.

In the climate of increasing authoritarianism that governs the university – with leaders who exercise power without authority, but who do so increasingly brazenly – the route to survival is conformity, or silence. This, too, is damaging. When, for example, the UK's research excellence framework (REF) makes it clear that certain journals are designated 4*, then, logically people will want to be published in these journals. Indeed, they may need to, if they are to avoid disciplinary performance management. The problem is that this narrows the range of research and, even worse, drives published research into conformity with the presiding ideological bent of these journals. Thus, when the economics discipline favoured journals that comply with the ideological dominance of mathematical economics, it was ill-prepared to see the financial crash that followed as a consequence of our subscription precisely to mathematical economics. Conformity may have saved academic careers here, but it damaged society and the livelihoods of many both inside and outside our institutions. As for economics, so also for every discipline: there has been a radical narrowing of scope, and a corresponding narrowing of the range of academic freedom to research and teach properly, speculatively and in the mode of untrammelled discovery.

In everyday Stalinism, the institution intuits what it thinks must be done to appease the unstated will of the lord and master. That master can now be identified: large-scale, it is government and/or an undifferentiated realm of 'business'; and locally, it is the manager and senior management team under the leadership of the vice chancellor. Academic freedom, at this local level, thus becomes academic feudalism: we are required to demonstrate loyalty and to pay fealty and homage to the vice chancellor and the brand that demonstrates ownership of us and of our institutions. Once again, this may sound extreme; but it was precisely this language – loyalty – that was used when the president of Mount St Mary College tried to sack two professors who had dared to offer views and opinions contrary to those of the president.[8] In the UK, the university is increasingly identified as its senior management: the vice chancellor *is* Lancaster, *is* York, *is* Newcastle – and so on. Our institutions have been occupied and taken – stolen – from those who actually should own them: students, academic staff, the wider society and public good that the institution must properly serve.

Academy and capital: from knowledge to turnover

The combination of NPM and this everyday conformity produces the well-worn image of a dominant bureaucracy. Arendt called this 'rule by Nobody' or 'rule by the offices', which she also describes as the most cruel and tyrannical form of government or governance (see Arendt, 1970, p.38; *cf* Arendt, 1998). In bureaucracies, the key focus is on process and

procedure – *how* things are done, not *what* is done. That substance is increasingly hollowed out, until it disappears; and activity for its own sake becomes all.

When academic staff and students become functions in a system, the content of what they do becomes much less important than the maintenance of the system itself. This is the consequence of the supremacy of the human resources department in our institutions. First, once I am a function, the specific detail of my own being is insignificant: what matters is simply my place and function in the system. I then become a teaching mechanism, a research function and an administrative processor. Likewise, the student becomes a learning function. What she learns in disciplinary terms is no longer important, and is to be replaced by indoctrination into the systems and processes of extending GDP growth. 'Skills' will do this better than disciplinary knowledge. Behind this, however, is something much more dangerous to the university. It is the evacuation of knowledge from our activity, and thus the undermining of the very idea of what we are for.

When knowledge and assessment become subject to management, knowledge is reduced to information; and learning becomes an exercise in the managing of information and of information flows. We can see this as a removal of the institution from historical engagement, the reduction of university to ivory tower, divorced from material realities. These realities are data – 'what happens'. Information is what we get when these data are put into a meaningful statement; but knowledge requires the manipulation of the information, its analysis and scrutiny. Such analysis can happen only in and through discussion and debate; and, unlike the stability of information, it becomes provisional and subject to constant modification, precisely because it is conditioned by doubt and scrupulous analysis in dialogue. An atomized culture, driven by the translation of activities into commodities for sale, cannot bear such vagueness and imprecision or doubts. In this atomized structure, in which teaching has become a transaction between two discrete individuals (teacher and student), such knowledge or the activity of knowing disappears. All that remains is the iteration of information; and then the assessment of how well that information has been managed. This is what yields the vacuity of the UK's national student survey results.[9]

There is a fundamental hollowing-out of knowledge in all this. The primacy of 'transferable skills' means that discipline-specific skills can – and do – disappear as they are evacuated from the syllabus under the pressure of 'delivering' the 'skills' that will make all our graduates 'work-ready'. They are to be work-ready, though, for any and all kinds of work, seeking the lowest common denominator holding together everything from financial management, to media production, to plumbing, engineering, healthcare, arts administration, policing and everything else. This, too, so flattens the content of what we do in terms of work-readiness as to make it skeletally thin. Leave aside the fact that students are work-ready for a society in which there is a severe crisis of available work.

This is also consistent with a specific inflection of capitalism; and it may explain why there is now so much emphasis on so-called intellectual and/or academic capital. The reduction of knowledge to information actually injects a specific kind of capitalist activity into the very core of our fundamental practice. Capitalism inserts as many stages as possible between producer and consumer; and one significant consequence is an increased flow and circulation of economic activity. This, then, allows us to measure the success of an economy in terms of growth of GDP.

GDP measures activity, not the summation of funds. John Lanchester (2013) explains its operation:

> Imagine for a moment that you come across an unexpected ten pounds. After making a mental note not to spend it all at once, you go out and spend it all at once, on, say, two pairs of woolly socks. The person from the sock shop then takes your tenner and spends it on wine, and the wine merchant spends it on tickets to see *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, and the owner of the cinema spends it on chocolate, and the sweet shop owner spends it on a bus ticket, and the owner of the bus company deposits it in the bank. That initial ten pounds has been spent six times, and has generated £60 of economic activity. In a sense, no one is any better off; and yet, that movement of money makes everyone better off. To put it another way, that first tenner has contributed £60 to Britain's GDP. Seen in this way, GDP can be thought of as a measure not so much of size – how much money we have, how much money the economy contains – but of velocity. It measures the movement of money through and around the economy; it measures activity. If you had taken the same ten quid when it was first given to you and simply paid it into your bank account, the net position could be argued to be the same – except that the only contribution to GDP is that initial gift of £10, and if this behaviour were replicated across the whole economy, then the whole economy would grind to a halt.

The same dynamic is now at work in universities. There is massive activity, every second of the day must be accounted for in terms of produced results/outcomes; and the proper task is continually to increase activity. When this is commercialized, the activity is also monetized. Logically, therefore, the main point of our existence is to increase institutional growth or monetized turnover. It is important to note the precise meaning of this: the growth in question is not and cannot be anything to do with a growth of human happiness or well-being in the social world; rather, it is simply the growth of the financial turnover of the institution. That institution, as we have seen, is simply divorced from the social sphere. The net result of this is a specific 'grade inflation': the inflation of senior management pay, as a reward for increasing turnover and thus increasing the appearance of size. Big wins.

We are, after all, in a culture of competition; and this means that there are winners – and also losers. We can never be permitted to be on the losing side in this; yet it is of necessity a zero-sum game. In a competition, what should we rationally do? Well, we should probably learn to imitate the winner; and then we start to behave like the winner; and, all being well, by adopting the same tactics or strategies, we will perform in the same way. After all, it is only process and procedure that is in play, not substance. If we can game things the way the winner does, then we, too, are winners. In short: competition breeds conformity, which narrows our thought and finally evacuates thinking and knowing from the foundational purpose of the university. Just keep the money flowing.

It's worse than you think: from the boiled frog to the dodo

It is clear that the institution is now in danger. Indeed, this has been clear to many colleagues for quite some time. It is as if we are collectively heading for a cliff edge; we are fully aware of the consequences of continuing on this path, and yet we are helpless to arrest the onward drive. The driver is competition, and we know that, in such a culture, to pause for a moment is to lose to someone else. This is why we cannot stop, why we cannot afford to stop.

Our current political and social idea of 'competition' differs from the ecology of evolutionary competition – Darwinism – enormously. In the contemporary world, competition simply means a zero-sum game that determinedly produces losers while winners gain all the spoils. In short, it is an ideology that yields structured inequality as a social norm. In this, it is indeed the case that, progressively and incrementally, more and more individual institutions are likely to close, as the 2015 Green Paper envisages. Worse, the contemporary institution

is a key instrument in the extension of structural social inequality. This is immoral. This desperate trajectory can be halted, however. To halt it, the institution needs to reassert itself as something greater than a vassal.

One whose thinking has shaped a good deal of our contemporary predicaments is F.A. Hayek. Hayek was the great guru of such politicians as Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher; and his influence on contemporary politics remains substantial and significant. In his classic text, *The Road to Serfdom*, he writes an extended apologia for individualism. His argument is essentially against the planned economy. For Hayek, the danger of planned economies is a tendency to reduce the singularity of individuals to the abstraction of the collective. He sees this as a fundamental threat to individual freedom, which is characterized by

> the respect for the individual man *qua* man, that is, the recognition of his own views and tastes as supreme in his own sphere, however narrowly that may be circumscribed, and the belief that it is desirable that men should develop their own individual gifts and bents. (Hayek, 1944/2014, p.68)

The key problem Hayek sets out to address is what he saw as the restriction of growth, for he argues that it was the general 'growth of commerce' that, historically, was responsible for 'the gradual transformation of a rigidly hierarchical system into one where men could at least attempt to shape their own life' and 'where man gained the opportunity of knowing and choosing between different forms of life' (Hayek, 1944/2014, p.69). Higher education now appears to value growth for the sake of growth, circulation of money for its own sake, giving the mirage of financial success while actually simply revealing that everyone is being kept busy chasing money round the system. It is appropriate to conclude on the effects of this, and even Hayek might be called up in support of a different inflection of the current economics of higher education.

Hayek does not object to planning as such, conceding that every individual conducts her or his life according to shifting and varied plans. These plans, however, are pragmatic, local and relatively autonomous. What he objects to is centralized planning. 'What our planners demand', he writes, 'is a central direction of all economic activity according to a single plan, laying down how the resources of society should be "consciously directed" to serve particular ends in a definite way' (Hayek, 1944/2014, p.85). Is this not a perfect description of what passes for strategy or for the mission statement in our institutions? Is it not also an equally perfect description of the entirely utilitarian and instrumentalist view of higher education that is now the ideological norm? Does the REF, for example, not serve precisely this kind of centralized planning function? And is this not what 'impact' is about in a research culture that must not only predict outcomes before experiments are conducted, but must also predict that these outcomes will boost economic growth?

This, for Hayek, is what threatens his account of liberal individualism with a reversion to serfdom. In higher education, it is enforced by the required service to the brand. We can echo Hayek when he says that 'Our point … is not that dictatorship must inevitably extirpate freedom but rather that planning leads to dictatorship because dictatorship is the most effective instrument of coercion and the enforcement of ideals' (Hayek, 1944/2014, p.110). This – the enforcement of ideals – is precisely what we can understand as the requirement to conform to brand identity and to other political norms; and it is an enforcement that is engaged more and more brazenly and more and more directly in higher education worldwide.[10] Yet the 'ideal' in question is that immoral principle, according to which universities guarantee the extension of structural inequality.

There is a profound cynicism to Hayek's position. He argues that the more highly educated one is, the less likely it is that one will easily agree with others and form a general consensus. It follows for him that consensus can be achieved only among less-educated people, whom he characterizes as 'the masses'. Further, the logic of this cynicism is that planning – which, for Hayek, means totalitarianism meshed with socialism – depends upon drumming into the masses an easily repeated idea. That, however, is what we can now recognize in our universities as the demand for institutional and ideological conformity, the explicit narrowing of thought – making the academy (and its society) less well-educated, in fact – and the coercive demand and requirement that no academic freedom exists that will effectively counter that dominant and tyrannical hierarchy.

This, in the end, is the academic feudalism that now threatens our institutions, making them the home of an education that is ideologically – and intellectually – narrowed in the furtherance of social conformity. If we are to avoid the fate of the boiled frog, it follows that we must reassert academic freedom, and this means we must arrest the incremental turning up of the heat that is threatening our extinction.

The logic of competition makes it difficult for the sector as a whole to stop this process. There is always the fear that someone will betray the project by only pretending to be part of the critique, by only pretending to contest the immorality of structural inequality, in order to curry more favour with government or business. This means that we need at least the bravery of unilateral action: we need someone to take a lead.

Unless we do this, we will face a situation where we revert historically to a condition in which the university exists in order to breed and to police social, political and personal conformity. At that point – and it is a point we can too readily recognize today – the university becomes simply an agent of the surveillance state, and stops being a university, even if it retains the title. In its slavish adherence to an ideology of conformity, the university will fail to adapt to our emergent predicaments. It will not only go the way of the boiled frog; it will go the way of the dodo.

Notes

1. It was in the 1980s that we first saw the emergence and eventual triumph of a language that discussed the university as a 'business'. This was the first move in a general tendency towards privatization of the sector over the last 40 years or so; and it culminates in its own logic in the Browne Report (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010), in which the university is seen as a private good, or as the means by which individuals can service their own acquisitive greed. It is to the great credit of students and academic staff that, while acknowledging the primacy of this ideology, substantial work nonetheless goes on to mitigate its worst excesses. This work is the proper 'business' – or, better, 'activity' – of the university.
2. For a clear analysis of how this systematic transfer of commonly shared wealth into the hands of a few private individuals has happened in the UK, see Meek (2014).
3. There is a governmental precedent for this in the UK, in the famous example of the former Conservative Secretary of State for Home Affairs, Michael Howard. In the 1990s, while he was Home Secretary and held responsibility for the prison service, there was a series of high-profile escapes and attempted escapes from prisons. Notoriously, and despite criticisms in the report from John Learmont (1995) (which Howard had commissioned), Howard refused to resign, and instead sacked Derek Lewis, who was the chief executive of the prison service. Howard's logic was that escapes were an operational matter, and not his responsibility, which was instead limited to matters of policy. For a good discussion of this, see Tomkins (1998, pp.45–55).

4. A key example of this is seen in the dark underside of meritocracy. Increasingly, the political situation in which entire classes of individuals remain underprivileged is to be addressed through the 'widening participation' agenda. Those who still find themselves with limited 'social mobility' after this, are said to 'lack aspiration': the problems of poverty and the failures to fulfil human potential are no longer the problems of politicians in charge of our social formations; and instead the ideology says that the problems lie with the poor themselves. They are socially inadequate.
5. The statement that we live in a 'fast-changing environment' is a cliché, and one that bears little scrutiny. David Hare (2016) is useful on this. In the abridged text of his 2016 Richard Hillary lecture, given in the University of Oxford, he comments on an abiding meaning of political conservatism: 'You may say that the [Conservative] party aims, like all such parties, to keep the well off well off. That, never forget, is any rightwing grouping's conservative mission …'. In other words, things are not fast-changing at all; they remain all too long the same. Perhaps worse, the university, as an NPM capitalist organization, is now complicit in keeping this particular economic structure unchanged.
6. I borrow this observation from the academic irregularities blog of Liz Morrish, available from academicirregularities.wordpress.com/about/.
7. Such instances are bad for the brand. In this light, see the efforts of the University of California, Davis and its leadership to erase all negative references to incidents where students were pepper-sprayed on campus, available from http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article71659992.html [Accessed 31 October 2016].
8. For details, see https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/09/mount-st-marys-president-fires-two-faculty-members-one-tenure [Accessed 31 October 2016].
9. Further information on the national student survey in the UK may be found at http://www.thestudentsurvey.com.
10. For a fuller exploration of this, with a documentation of ways in which direct forms of violence are increasingly normal, see Barrow (2014).

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