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RESPONSE

Warwick University plc: neo-liberalism, authoritarianism and resistance

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Introduction

What is happening to our universities? Ben Martin rightly points to a paradox in the development of UK higher education over the past few decades: the increasing prevalence of hierarchical and centralised management structures, seemingly in opposition to an academic literature stressing the numerous benefits of flatter organisational structures, decentralisation and local autonomy. Two causes of these unfortunate changes, he suggests, are the drive for ever greater economic efficiency and globalisation and increasing competition. Underlying his proposition paper, but not explicitly drawn out, is the encroachment of neo-liberalism into the university. Herein lies one of the most important explanations for this seeming paradox, for the processes of neo-liberalisation often go hand-in-hand with increased authoritarianism and the dismantling of democracy. I will seek to unravel these processes as they have been occurring at the University of Warwick in recent decades, and will explore the concurrent dynamics of resistance in the staff and student body.

Neo-liberalism and higher education

Neo-liberalism differs from classic *laissez faire* liberalism in that it relies upon the forced creation of markets, competition and commercialism by the enabling state, often in places where they do not naturally occur, such as education. Indeed, '[e]ven when individuals or organizations are not acting in a market, the project of neo-liberalism is to judge them and measure them *as if* they were acting in a market' (Davies, 2014, p.21). Neo-liberal practice – which is pragmatic and often differs from neo-liberal ideology – is comfortable with highly bureaucratised, monopolistic corporations, centres of private power that bear little relation to a decentralised free market economy. Neo-liberalism has also traditionally manifested itself in tandem with authoritarian state structures (Klein, 2008), whether in Germany during the allied occupation of the late 1940s (Srnicek and Williams, 2015, p.52), or in Pinochet's Chile after 1973 (Harvey, 2007).

Since the neo-liberal transformation of Britain in the 1980s and New Labour's subsequent embrace of Thatcherism, public life and institutions – including those in higher education – have increasingly internalised the language and logic of neo-liberalism. When this ideology is viewed as incorporating centralising tendencies and respect for 'the economically rational

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authority of the manager' (Davies, 2014, p.5), it is unsurprising that British universities are becoming hierarchical and centralised. As Thomas Docherty – a Warwick professor who has been engaged in battle with Warwick's management over these issues (Matthews, 2014) – has argued, the neo-liberalisation of universities leads to 'the necessity of internal authoritarianism' (Docherty, 2015, p.125), an all-encompassing obsession with the brand, and the model of a corporation requiring conformity around a party line (p.109).

Authoritarian neo-liberalisation is rife in higher education.[1] The era of majority state-funding has ended, requiring reliance on alternative forms of income. Private corporations have become more embedded in the life and purpose of the university. Outsourcing of staff has increased. Universities have been subject to artificial forms of competition, most prominently with the increasing prevalence and influence of league tables. They have taken on the language and form of private corporations, issuing bonds (Quested, 2012) and emphasising their brand and capacity to generate revenue. Student identity has changed 'from that of learner to that of consumer' (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p.12); the 'pipeline of graduates […] for a 21st-century economy' (Joe Johnson quoted in Morgan, 2015), as the universities minister put it, flows through higher education. Government sees higher education as a business producing a private good rather than a place for dissent and political mobilisation. The new Teaching Excellence Framework even proposes linking the right to raise tuition fees with measures of graduate earnings (McGettigan, 2016). A new financial incentive structure will encourage universities to mould students into subjects suitable for integration into the corporate economy. Indeed, the intellectual roots of English higher education policy, with its income-contingent loans and human capital concept of educational value, are to be found in the neo-liberalism of Milton Friedman (Morris, 2012; McGettigan, 2015, pp.4–5). Concurrent with these changes has been the dampening of democracy and resistance, aided by the systematic de-politicisation of student unions, the use of authoritarian legal instruments and increased surveillance.

Warwick University plc

> [We have seen at Warwick] the creation, not of a democratic academic community, but a 'well-managed operation', assisting the business corporation and emulating some of its more dubious methods. (Thompson, 1970/2014)

This 'thoroughgoing marketization of higher education, albeit state-directed' (Holmwood, 2012) – what I'm calling the 'neo-liberalisation' of our universities – was readily able to penetrate the University of Warwick, an experiment in academic capitalism before neo-liberalism became hegemonic (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). One of the seven new universities,[2] it was from its founding in 1965 inextricably bound up with local and regional business interests. In 1943, the earliest known public call for a university in Coventry advocated a technical university to work on industrial problems, particularly for the West Midlands automotive industry (Shattock, 1991, p.9). The proposal to the University Grants Committee went ahead only once the support of a powerful industrial lobby (Courtaulds, Coventry Radiators, Dunlop, Jaguar and Rootes) had been secured in 1960, along with generous donations from a host of private corporations and foundations. Several of the industrialists who sat on the original promotion committee later took up positions on the University Council, leading E.P. Thompson, then a Warwick lecturer, to launch his famous critique of 'Warwick University Ltd' during the uprising of staff and students in 1970 (Thompson, 2014).

Since the decline, breakup or merger of several of these founding corporations, Warwick University has developed links with national and multinational companies, particularly in the manufacturing and finance sectors. In 2007, Warwick Manufacturing Group, founded in 1980 to 'exactly match the ideas advanced by […] the industry group in the Promotion Committee' (Shattock, 2015, p.119), 'celebrated a 10-year partnership' with arms manufacturer BAE Systems 'that has resulted in significant returns for the defence and aerospace company' (WMG, 2007). The science park, opened in 1984 by Margaret Thatcher on the outskirts of campus and initially funded by Barclays, now houses 85 high technology companies (University of Warwick, nd) and made elaborate efforts, according to Michael Shattock, a former registrar, 'to introduce students into company projects' (Shattock, 2015, p.21). In 1993, BP signed a 50-year, rent-free lease for a large portion of the campus library to house and manage its corporate archive (Macalister, 2015). More recently, Warwick Business School opened an £11m, 10-year space in the Shard in London in order to 'make a stronger and deeper connection with lots of businesses', according to a figure central to the development of the project (Woodman, 2015b). The prediction that academic capitalism will lead to more money going into 'noninstructional services, buildings, and personnel to make the institution a more attractive consumption item' (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p.284) appears prescient.

Warwick's problem lies not in its relationship with actors external to the university – on the contrary, universities should be 'answerable to and alert to the needs of a social formation within which' they operate (Docherty, 2015, p.117). The problem, as Thompson pointed out decades ago, is Warwick's 'particular kind of subordinate relationship with industrial capitalism' (Thompson, 2014, p.17). The links between academia and industry heralded by the new vice chancellor (University of Warwick, 2016) mean links with the *management* of corporations, rarely links with workers and trade unions.

When the Conservatives began drastically cutting funding for the University Grants Committee in 1979/80, new sources of finance had to be found. Established universities with extensive alumni networks (like those of Oxford and Cambridge) could rely on numerous private benefactors. The only major private philanthropy Warwick attracted was from the Martin Trust, the legacy of Jack Martin, the founder of Smirnoff Vodka (Shattock, 2000). Instead, Warwick focused first on increasing its share of international students when fees for overseas individuals were introduced;[3] and it developed the earned income group – now the Campus and Commercial Services Group – focused purely on generating a surplus from commercial activities. The transformation of much of Warwick into a profitable business was largely a product of Thatcher's neo-liberal initiation at the national level.

Conferences have been a particular focus, with a £1m refurbishment preceding a £5.3m investment in its fourth permanent conference space this year (Colston, 2016). This has led to increasing obsession with Warwick's branding and image. In December 2014, police were called to the campus during a sit-in by a free education group, leading to several students being sprayed with CS gas, tasers being drawn, and three arrests (Gilbert, 2014). A subsequent student occupation of a space used primarily for conferences was served a £12,558 high court injunction (Woodman, 2015a). This injunction is indefinite and campus-wide, banning all occupations and sit-ins on university land. In their legal and public justifications for the injunction, officials explicitly utilised a quantitative cost–benefit logic, arguing that the cost of the occupation to the university outweighed the costs of the injunction. Thus do the strands of resistance, authoritarian reaction and commercialisation emerge

and entwine: students and staff react to increasing marketisation, targeting the university's financial flows and image. The pressure of branding and commercialisation generates an authoritarian reaction from the university management, in turn causing further response and polarisation of management and academic community. Similar dynamics have played out at Sussex, where five students were suspended following an occupation of a conference centre in 2013 (Marotta, 2015).

This focus on brand and accumulation goes hand-in-hand with opacity in decision making, and engenders both scandal and resistance: 'instead of "efficiency", the managers drive headlong towards confrontation after confrontation' (Thompson, 2014, p.163). In 2015, Warwick unveiled a new logo that cost £80,000. It sparked an immediate backlash and a 5,000-strong petition calling for the rebranding to be halted (Gil, 2015). What was at issue was not so much the logo itself, but the lack of consultation, high-handedness and waste of resources it signified. The Shard project, and plans to build a new campus in California, have similarly been devoid of any meaningful student engagement. These feelings have been compounded by the revelation that Warwick has been lobbying to be exempt from the freedom of information act on the grounds that exemption would level the playing field with respect to private providers of higher education (Adhia and Woodman, 2016). Numerous FOI requests from student journalists are rejected on the basis that disclosure would harm the university's commercial interests. The language and logic of competition and privatisation are creating incentives and justifications for erecting walls of secrecy in the university. Similar processes have been occurring at other institutions: University College London, for example, was recently embroiled in the same cycle of accumulation, resistance and reaction over rents. When a student journalist got hold of documents suggesting UCL was making millions of pounds from its accommodation and moved to publish the information, she was threatened with expulsion (Jackson, 2016).

Warwick has traditionally been a leader in the neo-liberalisation of higher education, even a training ground: some 14 current and former UK registrars cut their teeth as members of Warwick's management (Shattock, 2012). The management-commissioned Tyzack Report, published in 1968, explicitly advocated modelling Warwick's management on a 'well-run business', bemoaning the fact that 'the university is [...] inefficient by normal commercial or industrial standards' (Thompson, 2014, pp.136–43). During the early research assessment exercises – a step towards the manufactured competition endemic in neo-liberalism – Warwick was one of the first universities in studiously preparing, and thereby pushing itself up the rankings (Shattock, 2013). In a stark example of the intensification and extensification of work under neo-liberalism (Gill, 2010, p.234), some Warwick administrators now even work at a 'treadmill desk' to keep them both productive and healthy (Bannister, 2016).

Warwick has also led the way in employment casualisation: Warwick employment group (WEG) is a collection of recruitment services, including UniTemps, an agency for cleaning, security and catering staff. UniTemps was founded at Warwick in 1997 and has since spread to at least 10 universities. The employment contracts offered by these firms tend to give workers fewer rights, make unionisation harder and provide little security. One Ph.D. student employed by UniTemps at Warwick was allegedly fired after taking part in industrial action (Else, 2015). In 2015, WEG tried to set up TeachHigher, a new scheme casualising and insourcing postgraduate work (Gallagher, 2015). Backlash from students and staff led to its dissolution (Grove, 2015b). Minutes showed that the scheme, like UniTemps, was intended

to be rolled out across the sector as a commercial franchise (McVegas, 2015). Warwick is something of an incubator for neo-liberal experiments in higher education.

Commercialisation at Warwick has provoked resistance and, in reaction, a range of mechanisms for social control. The presence of police and a security force on campus has always been inextricably bound up with the management of dissent. Two massive occupations in 1970 resulted in the first proposals for a university warden to 'assist the vice chancellor in the maintenance and promotion of good order in the university' (*Campus*, 1970). At the same time, proposals were being drawn up to deal with 'collective misbehaviour', including a 'security force with keen memories' able to recognise troublemakers (Ford, 1970). In 1975, several hundred police officers evicted rent strikers from senate house, and in 1984 kept watch on protests against Margaret Thatcher's campus visit. Today, Warwick security services are augmented by private guards, and plain-clothed security officers with body cameras (Hurley, 2015) – and sometimes by fully-armed police (Eccleston, 2016). Students have been threatened with disciplinary action for chalking slogans on campus (the university desperate to maintain its pristine image for the external world), barred by bail conditions from full access to campus, and charged under draconian public order offenses (Woodman, 2015a). It is important to note that this resistance has had a real impact on the development of the university; even former members of its management admit that the 1970 troubles altered the structure of the university (Gaber, 2003). Indeed, that the neo-liberalisation of some of the other seven sisters, such as Sussex University, has proceeded at a greater pace than Warwick, may be a result of our campus legacy of activism.

National trends are disconcerting, particularly the provisions in the 2015 Counter-terrorism and Security Act to make compliance with the government's Prevent duty mandatory. Prevent has established 'one of the most elaborate systems of surveillance ever seen in Britain' (Kundnani, 2009, p.8), and Warwick's newly-inaugurated vice chancellor speaks of the 'endless parade of horror stories' it has produced (Croft, 2016). Yet, Warwick has kept details of its compliance with Prevent under wraps for months, and documentation has only recently been released. Warwick stated its desire to be 'aware of who is using the multi-faith facilities and [have] assurance that vulnerable individuals are not at risk of being proselytised/radicalised' and noted its ability 'retrospectively [to] monitor the historic usage of computing facilities in the event that a concern is raised regarding an individual user' (Woodman, 2016a). There are serious concerns that the panoptic effect of such capabilities, with the spectre of special branch in the background, will chill political activism and further marginalise minorities on campus (Hall, 2015).

Warwick's former vice chancellor, Nigel Thrift, proclaimed his 'firm belief that universities are fundamentally there for the public good and not as a system of private investment for private return' (Thrift, 2008, pp.19–20). For Thrift, there were 'obvious detrimental consequences' inherent in 'the way in which at least some European governments have now begun to think of the university as being firmly in the private sector' (p.20). It may be that the pressure of institutional and national forces crush the principles of those who head our universities: Thrift's record as vice chancellor of Warwick stands in stark contrast to these pronouncements (Bassi, 2014; Woodman, 2016b). In his academic life, Thrift could praise 'new and interesting forms of resistance … many of them based upon a resistance to corporate power' (Thrift, 2001, p.379): in his dying days as vice chancellor, Thrift condemned free education activists as 'yobs' (Grove, 2015a).

Institutional memory, student unions and resistance

Martin asks why most academics have so meekly accepted these developments. The same might be asked of students. Until 2010, we seemed to be putting up little resistance to these changes.

Authoritarian neo-liberalism has also contributed to student malaise. Less leisure time, and increasingly more stress from employment uncertainty and individualised competition, render students and staff 'too exhausted to resist' (Gill, 2010, p.241). A crucial second contribution comes from the de-politicisation of student unions. During the 1970s and 1980s, Warwick was known as 'Red Warwick' on account of its occupations, demonstrations and rent strikes. Often the union would vote in general meetings on a strategy – fighting for a union building, apartheid divestment, rent hikes – and students would begin occupying as soon as the meeting adjourned. Now, unions are often seen as mere service providers, devoid of political content. A 'common thread in [neo-liberal thought] … is an attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation' (Davies, 2014, p.3).

The institutional memory of struggle has been expunged from unions and universities more generally. Warwick, for example, has just held its 50th anniversary celebrations. The uprisings and the campaigns fought over the decades were strictly avoided in official pronouncements and publications. In his 138-page study of half a century of the University of Warwick, Michael Shattock devotes only two sentences to student troubles (Shattock, 2015, pp.50, 96). This silence is curious, given that Shattock, sometime registrar and in the senior management between 1969 and 1999, is well aware that the 'Warwick Spring' of 1970 resulted in institutional reform across the university. He himself admits that it was an event of such gravity it took the management a decade to recover (Gaber, 2003). On the rare occasion that this history is acknowledged, it is rendered quaint, even romanticised – qualitatively different from the struggles of the present, which therefore must be crushed.

Student unions have also been brought increasingly under charity law, which, as the research paper accompanying the 1994 education bill put it, 'restricts the activities, and in particular the political activities, which charities can undertake' (Gillie, 1994, p.5). In 1983, the attorney general had already argued that, 'for a union to expend its charitable funds in supporting a political campaign or demonstration is extremely unlikely to be justifiable unless the issue directly affects students as students' (Gillie, 1994, p.28). This included providing funds to support industrial action or overseas struggles.[4] Under John Major, who pledged that '[t]he days in which [student unions] march and demonstrate at the taxpayer's expense are numbered' (Major, 1992), the education act formally defined union activity as relevant to students *as students*, rather than as citizens (Bols, 2014). Finally, student unions with an income greater than £100,000 were required to register as charities by the 2006 charities act (Pinsent Masons, 2007), subject to the watch and regulation of the charity commission. Any campaigning activity which might be construed as potentially illegal, including occupations and direct action, has become difficult for unions to support. At Warwick, the frequency of occupations plummeted during the 1990s and 2000s; all in all, the ability of student unions to mobilise and organise on wider political issues has been neutered, if not yet eliminated.

But there are promising signs of struggle re-emerging from the wreckage of the 2010 student movement. At Warwick, a joint student–staff campaign has encouraged the university assembly, one of the most democratic bodies in the decision-making structure, to

condemn the government's latest education green paper and its Prevent policy. The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, the radical wing of the student movement, is still going strong. A new de-colonial movement is sweeping across the country on the back of the black students campaign of the National Union of Students, and the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford campaign continuing a long tradition of student agitation over institutional racism and curriculum reform (Arthur, 2011). Warwick has a history of imagining something other than the financialised neo-liberal university. In 1970, students unilaterally declared an 'open university' for a week, calling on the citizens of Coventry and Warwickshire to descend on campus and partake in a programme of talks, discussions and events (Anon, 1970). Such activities are antithetical to 'the transformation of higher education into the private good of training and the positional good of opportunity, where the returns on both are higher earnings' (McGettigan, 2015, p.2). We can draw on this history of dissent at Warwick to answer the call of E.P. Thompson in the closing page of *Warwick University Ltd*:

> Is it inevitable that the university will be reduced to the function of providing, with increasingly authoritarian efficiency, pre-packed intellectual commodities which meet the requirements of management? Or can we by our efforts transform it into a centre of free discussion and action, tolerating and even encouraging 'subversive' thought and activity, for a dynamic renewal of the whole society within which it operates?

Notes

1. Determining which processes are the result of neo-liberal ideology and practice, and which of changes endogenous to the academy, or of related but distinct changes (such as the emergence of the knowledge economy) is beyond the scope of this paper.
2. Along with East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex and York.
3. Now about 26% of Warwick's student population (Shattock, 2015, p.72).
4. Both had regularly been supported by the student union at Warwick. In March 1972, for example, the student union sent 10 delegates to a civil disobedience march in Ulster (*Campus*, 1972).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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