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PERFORMATIVITY, COMMODIFICATION AND COMMITMENT: AN I-SPY GUIDE TO THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reflection is a dangerous thing; it is all too easy to slip from careful re-assessment and analysis into nostalgia and 'golden ageism', although in a period of austerity that slippage might be very understandable.

Let us get to the nub of things. I was a student in two 'plate glass', welfare state universities, Essex (founded 1964) and Sussex (founded 1961), although they were very different. Essex was very small, socially very diverse and politically 'exciting', to say the least – a sort of comprehensive university. My sociology teachers there profoundly influenced me intellectually and they taught me to think. Sussex, 'Balliol by the Sea' as it was dubbed, had a very different social profile and institutional habitus but was pedagogically very adventurous. When I started teaching at Sussex in the School of Education we recruited 24 full-time, fully funded Masters students every year, many of them from the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and we worked closely with the various innovative comprehensive schools which had been created in East and West Sussex. My aim as a researcher and a teacher became to provide tools for others to think with. I was produced and formed as a welfare state academic subject in these contexts. Over the past 20 years, I have been re-formed as a neoliberal academic subject. This is the move, as Stefan Collini refers to it in his essay review of the 2011 Higher Education White Paper, 'From Robbins to McKinsey' (Collini, 2011, p. 9). Fred Inglis (Inglis, 2011) portrays this move in dramatic and emotive terms:

> I suggest that our epoch is tearing itself away from the narratives that have bestowed meaning and continuity upon the northern hemisphere since 1945, and lost reason in 1989 at the end of the Cold War. What is dying is plain enough; but what rough beast, its hour come at last, slouches towards us to be born remains unimaginable.

I want to consider – reflect on, imagine, some aspects of that 'reformation' brought about by that rough neoliberal beast and the concomitant changes in my academic subjectivity. In particular those aspects of reform that have required me to make myself calculable rather than memorable. However, I do not use the term

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neoliberal here lightly, it is one of those terms which is so widely and loosely used that it is in danger of becoming a detached signifier. What I mean by it here is 'a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the "market" as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives' (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). The key point of this, and the organising principle for this paper, is that neoliberalism is 'in here' as well as 'out there' (Peck, 2003). I will attend to both aspects. On the one hand, there is, of course, a very, very real economic and political dynamic to the reform of Higher Education, a business dynamic which seeks profit from the buying and selling of education 'services'. This has become a part of the financial planning and commercial adventures of our institutions and involves, in various ways, the commodification of our academic practice. On the other, neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others. It is about how we relate to our students and our colleagues and our participation in new courses and forms of pedagogy and our 'knowledge production', but it is also about our flexibility, malleability, innovation and productivity in relation to these things. Knowledge has its price.

> Knowledge is divorced from people, their allegiance to value, their life commitments. Knowledge, as Pierre Bourdieu told us years ago, has become capital. The centuries-old and valid tradition that taught the inwardness of knowledge, its pertinence to the deep structure of the self, the defining relation of one's discipline to one's self, is being thinned out to the point of fracture. (Inglis, 2011)

We do need to keep reminding ourselves that Higher Education has been previously implicated in the transitions of capitalism and the attendant disjunctures in policy and regulation. Nonetheless, old and new paradigms of Higher Education are currently particularly difficult to reconcile as 'Schools, colleges, universities, think tanks, design centres, and research laboratories stand on the front line in the search for competitive advantage' (Brown *et al*., 2009, p. 20) and educational services become an ever increasing proportion of GDP in many northern societies, while at the same time, great swathes of 'knowledge work' are being exported to the new economic tigers.

One key and immediate facet of the new paradigm is 'the re-invention of professionals themselves as units of resource whose performance and productivity must constantly be audited so that it can be enhanced' (Shore and Wright, 1999, p. 559) and there is a proliferation of new spaces of calculation and new visibilities within which we relate to one another, and seek our place and our worth and our needs. Our days are numbered – literally – and ever more closely and carefully. Increasingly, we are 'governed by numbers' (Ozga, 2008) as 'the technology of statistics creates the capacity to relate to reality as a field of government' (Hunter, 1996, p. 154).

All of this brings about a profound shift in our relationships, to ourselves, our practice, and the possibilities of being an academic. In other words, 'One sort of romance about being an academic is no longer speakable, thinkable, do-able in

universities at the turn of the millennium' (McWilliam *et al*., 1999, p. 69) and is replaced by 'a new romance in which the enterprising academic is the central figure'. We are empowered to make ourselves into different or 'new' academics and we do much of this making to ourselves and to each other as well as in relation to the new performative professionals – who are in Weber's terms 'specialists without spirit'. And yet over and against these persuasive transparencies and possibilities for excellence there is still something else, something incompatible, that I want to defend and assert. But even as I write I am aware, in the neoliberal bits of my soul, of the impossibility of what I seek to defend – that which the University 'can alone do and do best' (Kumar, 1997, p. 29), to enable people to think.

2. Performativity: from Excellence to Despair

Central to the above is what I have called previously (Ball, 2001, 2003), with a little help from Lyotard and Foucault – performativity – a powerful and insidious policy technology that is now at work at all levels and in all kinds of education and public service, a technology that links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output. Within the rigours and disciplines of performativity we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it. There are new sets of skills to be acquired here – skills of presentation and of inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves. As a consequence we become transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves – 'I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself' (Butler, 2004, p. 15).

In regimes of performativity experience is nothing, productivity is everything. Last year's efforts are a benchmark for improvement – more publications, more research grants, more students. We must keep up; strive to achieve the new and very more diverse targets which we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive, ensuring what O'Flynn and Petersen (2007, p. 469) call a 'targeted self' or what Gee (1999) refers to as the 'shape-shifting portfolio person'. Within all of this more and more of the scholarly disposition is rendered explicit and auditable.

Increasingly, as we adapt ourselves to the challenges of reporting and recording our practice, social structures and social relations are replaced by informational structures. We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible. Performativity is a moral system that subverts and re-orients us to its ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and for the performance of others. 'There are two technologies at play here turning us into governable subjects – a technology of *agency* and a technology of *performance*' (Davies and Petersen 2005, p. 93). We are produced rather than oppressed, animated rather than constrained! We take responsibility for working hard, faster and better as part of our sense of personal worth and the worth of

others. As Caroline Hatcher aptly puts it, being responsible and enterprising is 'both a leverage for change as well as a closure on what it is possible to become' (Hatcher, 1998, p. 382). These techniques of regulation and self-regulation are creating a new episteme of public service through a 'reshaping of "deep" social relations' (Leys, 2001, p. 2) which involve the subordination of moral obligations to economic ones (Walzer, 1984) so that 'everything is simply a sum of value realised or hoped for' (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001). Productive individuals, new kinds of subjects, are the central resource in a reformed, entrepreneurial public sector. Those who 'under-perform' are subject to moral approbation. Systems designed to 'support' or encourage those who are unable to 'keep up' continuously teeter on the brink of moral regulation.

There is for many in Higher Education a growing sense of ontological insecurity; both a loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do. Are we doing things for the 'right' reasons – and how can we know! The first order effect of performativity is to re-orient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate measurable performative value. Teachers' judgments about class or lecture room processes may thus be subverted and superceded by the demands of measurement or at the very least a new set of dilemmas is produced which set the tyranny of metrics over and against professional judgment. The second order effect of performativity is in the possibilities it creates to replace commitment with contract. That is to say, to the extent that HE practices – teaching, writing and research – can be rendered into calculabilities, they can also be re-written as contracts of performance that can, at some point, be put out to tender.

In relation to these endogenous techniques of reform and the processes involved in making Higher Education more business-like, there is also a set of exogenous changes. These exogenous changes work on and in public sector Higher Education in two ways – both through competition and by absorption. The competition is indicated in the enormous global growth in private higher education in the last 10–15 years. Private higher education is worth an estimated $400 billion worldwide – and around a quarter of all higher education students are in private institutions (Spencer, 2008). In addition, a large number of students study outside their home countries. Their numbers have increased by 2.7 million or 50 per cent since 2000. If current trends continue by 2025, almost 8 million students will be studying outside their home countries. India, China and Brasil have relied heavily on the private sector, local and transnational, to mop-up the increasing local demand for Higher Education and to respond to the needs of their economies for more highly skilled labour. A set of global and regional knowledge corporations are emerging (e.g. Apollo, Kaplan, Laureate) to take advantage of the profit opportunities created by this growth. It was no coincidence that the US Apollo corporation bought BPP holdings, owner of the English private business school BPP College, for £303 million, in anticipation of the award of degree-awarding

powers in 2010. This is a foothold in the UK degree market. The UK Coalition government have indicated that they see private Higher Education providers as a way of driving down the cost of expanded participation in Higher Education (see *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 24 March 2011). Absorption is more subtle, very wide spread and two-way. On the one hand, companies seeking new market opportunities in HE are keen to partner with 'public sector' universities, if that remains a meaningful designation. On the other, so-called public sector universities are seeking to increase their recruitment of overseas students and to expand recruitment abroad by setting up off-shore campuses, again sometimes in partnerships with private providers. Jefferey Richards (1997, p. xii) paints a grim picture of a commercialised Higher Education:

> The adoption of a commercial ethos means that what used to be a community of scholars, staff and students, engaged upon a common intellectual pursuit of intrinsic interest, value and coherence is in danger of being turned into a series of shambolic academic supermarkets in which student 'customers' load their trolleys haphazardly from pick 'n' mix shelves with cheap, nasty, flimsy modularised products lacking in intellectual fibre and nourishment.

3. From Commitment to contract – the Off-shore University

In 2000 the University of Nottingham opened a campus in Malaysia – UNiM (The University of Nottingham in Malaysia). UNiM has 2700 students from 50 different countries and Nottingham's UK, Malaysia and Chinese campuses (see below) now enrol over 30,000 students. The majority shareholder of UNiM is the Boustead Group, an engineering services and geo-spatial technology company. Nottingham spent £5.3 million on the Malaysia campus, and it owns a 29.1 per cent share (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 September 2007). It is not clear how Nottingham funded its investment in UNiM. The third partner is YTL Corporation Berhad, which owns and manages utilities and 'infrastructural assets' and owns 19 per cent of UNiM. UNiM awards University of Nottingham degrees. In effect, perhaps, Nottingham is licensing its trademark but the Vice-Chancellor at the time, Sir Colin Campbell, was adamant that a 'Franchise arrangement is too great a risk to reputation' and that 'Exams, marking and quality assurance are consistent' (*Education Guardian*, 4 September 2007). The University described their overseas strategy as 'exporting excellence' (Annual Report, 2005). The University of Nottingham won the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2006 and 2007. Newcastle and Southampton Universities also currently have campuses under construction in Malaysia's 'Educity' in Johor, and Australia's Monash University already operates in Malaysia, as does MIT. The Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology is already in Educity and Johns Hopkins is planning a medical school there.

UNIM was not the Boustead Group's only educational investment. An associate company of the Boustead group, Easycall International (China Education Ltd) owned Boustead College in China, a joint enterprise with Tianjin University of Commerce. In 2004 Easycall purchased Spherion Education, a New Zealand

company that runs 13 training institutes in Australia and New Zealand. Easycall has since been bought by the Raffles Education Corp., a Singapore based company, which owns Oriental University City (China) and which has grown from its founding in 1990 to operate three universities and 26 colleges across ten countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Nottingham University also has strong market relations with China and the number of Chinese students at Nottingham in the UK is well over 1000. Nottingham is also involved in a joint-venture university in China. Nottingham owns a 37.5 per cent share in the Ningbo University campus, a joint venture with the state-owned Wanli Education Group. The Wanli Education Group is an independent provider that runs a full range of educational services, from kindergartens to the Chinese equivalent of a university college. Since its establishment in 1993 the Wanli Education Group has invested nearly US$60 million and the group is responsible for nine institutions including an international school, a vocational college and a night school. The creation of opportunities for Chinese students to study abroad and the provision of wider access at home are key elements of the group's strategy. Wanli provided the infrastructure for Ningbo, worth £14 million. Douglas Tallack, professor of American studies and pro vice-chancellor of Nottingham, explained that about 30 per cent of the 'total investment' has come from Nottingham and that that figure includes notional values given to contributions in the form of non-monetary intellectual property rights. In terms of hard cash, the university has made a 'modest investment' it has been said. Some of the University library stock has been moved to the China campus. The license to operate the University of Nottingham-Ningbo is valid until 2055 (Ministry of Education, 5 September 2007).

> Nottingham University: reaping 'A Phenomenal return on a £40 million investment'
>
> 21 September 2007. Nottingham University's Ningbo campus now has 2,850 students studying for degrees equivalent to those in the UK. Nottingham says its aim is to build research and industry links with China and to improve student mobility between the countries. (*www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=310522&sectioncode=26* (accessed 1 July 2009))

In 2007, Liverpool University also launched a joint-venture university in China – the Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University near Shanghai. Liverpool has a 30 per cent stake in this joint venture but the financial backing for Liverpool's stake comes from Laureate Education. The company also provided the £1 million bond necessary for the University of Liverpool to operate in China. XJLU is a freestanding institution, which awards its own degrees and 'The purpose of this ambitious project was to boost Liverpool's global brand' according to the HE think tank Agora (Fazackerley, 2007, p. 26). The University of Liverpool is not directly responsible for quality or standards. The university is run by a board, whose members include the US company Laureate, the Suzhou Industrial Park and the Chinese partner university. Laureate also owns and runs the Les Roches

Jin Jiang International Hotel Management College and Sichuan Tianyi University in China. XJLU is listed on their website as one of their universities.

Laureate also provides the platform for Liverpool's online degrees (this was begun as a partnership with the Dutch corporation *K.I.Telearning* in 1999, Laureate bought K.I.T. in 2004) and in 2007 Liverpool announced another agreement with Laureate which will allow Laureate students to study on Liverpool summer school programmes, established dual degrees with students taking parts of their degree in each university system, and joint curriculum design projects in health sciences, information technology and the humanities. Liverpool may also set up onsite courses at Laureate Campuses. In 2006 Laureate took over the technology, student and human resources and financial management services of Bilgi University, Turkey, in a partnership arrangement.

Liverpool is also involved in a number of projects with Kaplan. Kaplan is a subsidiary of the Washington Post Company (owned by News International) and has 70 HE campuses in the USA in 20 states (as well as a variety of other HE services) and campuses also in China, Hong Kong and Singapore. In 2007 Kaplan's revenue was in excess of $2bn. In 1987 11 UK universities banded together to form NCUK (Northern Consortium United Kingdom – there are now 22 partners including five Irish Universities) that provides overseas transition centres for students wanting to study in the UK (including in China, Ireland, Japan, Kenya, Nigeria, South Korea, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, The United Kingdom and Vietnam). The local partner in China is ACE Education and in 2006 NCUK and ACE opened the Shanghai-British College. In April 2007 Kaplan took a minority interest in ACE and in November 2007 became the majority owner of Kaplan ACE. Liverpool and Kaplan have also established an international college located on the campus of the University of Liverpool. The aim is to prepare international students for entry into the University's undergraduate and graduate degree programmes. Such colleges are already in existence in partnership with the University of Sheffield, the University of Glasgow and Nottingham Trent University.

Clearly, within these relationships, roles and exchanges, what may have been a clear demarcation between public and private higher education, between public service and profit, is now thoroughly blurred. The financial activities of 'public sector' universities are complexly intertwined with those of the private sector. While Marginson (2006) argues that in the higher echelons of global HE it is status rather than profitability that is being competed for, the two often go hand in hand, especially as the fall-out from the global financial crises reduces funding of and recruitment to public HE from traditional sources.

> Research-intensive universities like Melbourne, Sydney, New South Wales and Queensland have been forced to exhibit a Jekyll and Hyde personality in the global environment. At home they are selective and focused on research and they engage in global benchmarking and cross-border research collaborations. But they also have another international agenda, identical to that of the 32 lesser Australia universities, which is to build a massive fee-paying enrolment to fill the revenue gap. (Marginson 2006, p. 26)

In addition to the examples quoted above, the Harvard Business School now has a branch in Delhi, and Columbia University has announced the opening of a number of global research centres (Paris, Mumbai, Beijing and Amman). These actors (the organisations and their employees) are doing 'globalising' and doing 'neoliberalising' work. Marginson (2006, p. 1) makes the point that: 'there can be no global flows of people, money, messages, ideas and policies without globalizing and globalized human agents (Marginson and Sawir, 2005). Globalization is inside higher education as well as outside. We are all implicated in it (though some have more moving power than others)'. The funding of public sector HE is increasingly opaque and the moral and educational bases of educational practices are increasingly murky. Viewed in terms of the developments outlined above, Western public universities are now 'hybrid organisational forms in which public and private interests are combined' (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Partnerships are a mechanism, powerful but relatively unobtrusive, for discursive insinuation, for the insertion of language, concepts, practices and subjectivities from the private sector into the public, 'sometimes generating', as Jane Kelsey puts it, 'monstrous hybrids that are haunting testaments to our naivety (2006, p. 1). Hybrid is a good term here, as values, practices and sensibilities are blended and adapted in unstable and sometimes unpredictable forms. Kelsey (2006) argues that 'University/business collaborations deepen the influence of corporate priorities and preferences and compress critical space' (p. 9). Nottingham and Liverpool and many others are no longer in any straightforward sense national public universities, they are transnational, corporate and profit-oriented, and they are positioned on the boundaries between academia and business – they/we are hybrids – there is little moral high ground for any of us here. Ambivalence is an effect of all of this, the sense of not being clear enough about what is worthwhile, what is defensible and what is objectionable. More generally Thrift (2005, p. 23) argues that there are 'an increasing number of symmetries between academia and business'. UK universities are involved in complex 'border-crossing' relationships with the private sector, state agencies, international consortia and other national states. Partnerships, linkages and networks 'join up' state organisations with commercial ones and create discursive capillaries through which the sensibilities and dispositions of enterprise, competition and profit flow and the ontology of neoliberalism is generalised. Complex relationships built upon contract rather than collegiality and aimed at profit generation rather than knowledge for its own sake or public service enfold public universities into the field of commerce.

Alongside the universities there are now a variety of schools operating internationally. There are the global chains, run by companies like NordAnglia, GEMS, and John Bauer and a small number of export brands like England's Marlborough College, which is also building a 900 student campus in Malaysia's Educity, and Dulwich College which has campuses in China and Korea.

Dulwich College Management International (DCMI) commenced operations in China, with the establishment of Dulwich College in Shanghai, a co-educational, non-denominational academic institution offering education to

the expatriate community, based on the same educational philosophy of Dulwich College London. Following the success of the Shanghai College DCMI have established Dulwich College in Beijing, Suzhou, and Zhuhai in China as well as in Seoul, Korea.

Some of these schools are aimed at the increasingly large, mobile, global middle class (see Ball, 2010), while others recruit local students whose parents are seeking high status English language education and qualifications for their children. Furthermore, working with a different direction of flow the national, public schools systems in countries like Canada, New Zealand and Australia, are marketed by their governments to recruit fee-paying, overseas school students, from as young as five. In the case of New Zealand: 'The spectacular growth of its export education industry – as indicated by student numbers and estimates of foreign currency earnings – has been accompanied by domestic and international government policies facilitating this trend'. This is what Martens and Starke call 'trade driven policy in education' (Martens and Starke, 2008, p. 15), and a group of like-minded countries, including New Zealand (the so-called 'Contact Group'), have been in the forefront of moves within the World Trade Organisation to facilitate the international deregulation of educational services.

4. Doing Battle in the Knowledge Wars

Both practice and principles are at stake in all of this as together we do the work of neoliberalising Higher Education and increasingly exchange value has become the medium of university discourse and decision-making. There is a set of complex inter-relations at work which portend a thorough-going commodification of university life.

Margaret Radin offers a useful but chilling breakdown of the 'indicia' of commodification:

> Objectification – treating persons and things instrumentally, as manipulable at will.
>
> Fungibility – when they are fully interchangeable with no effect on their value to the holder.
>
> Commensurability – when their values can be arrayed as a function of one continuous variable or can be linearly ranked.
>
> Money equivalence – where the continuous variable in terms of which they can be ranked is monetary value. (Radin 2001)

All of these are perfectly exemplified by the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF),[1] both in the ways in which it translates the rating of the worth of knowledge into specific levels of funding, and the mundane, repetitive and methodical ways in which we are daily subjected to a 'swarming of disciplinary mechanisms' (Foucault 1979, p. 211) as our scholarship and writing are carefully 'geared' to the demands and prescriptions of the REF categories. As HEFCE indicated (2009, p. 8) 'We will be able to use the REF to encourage desirable behaviours at three

levels', including, 'the behaviour of individual researchers within a submitted unit . . . '. Indeed, Olssen argues that with the REF 'there is a new shift from accountability over finances to control over substance and the content of what is researched' (Olssen, 2011, p. 345). The last vestiges of the independence of universities from the state, he argues, are cast aside.

If there are things that are worth defending within the previous regime of public service, and clearly not everything is, then one component of such a defence must be a proper understanding of the relations of power within which we now find ourselves enmeshed and which shape our present. Such an understanding involves coming to grips with the way in which the mundane techniques and tactics of attrition and change are joined-up in an 'ascending' configuration of power and in an identity of relation between the elements as indicated above. However, we also need to appreciate the inconsistencies and ambiguities within the social fields and discourses which enact this identity in practice. While we need to understand how these elements and their relations enter into us and encourage us to work on ourselves in a variety of ways we also need to hold firmly onto a sense that we are none of the things we now do, think or desire.[2] This is a necessary precursor to the possibility of free and critical thought in the neoliberal university. The other task is to convince others that this kind of thinking is worthwhile. Jane Kelsey puts it well when she says:

> When critics accuse us of professional and individual self-interest, nostalgic self-delusion and resistance to change, they have a point. But they also ignore a deep-seated and authentic conviction about, and sense of responsibility to maintain the power of knowledge to liberate the individual and the collectivity. (2006, p. 1)

5. Notes

[1] See www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/. The primary purpose of the REF is to produce assessment outcomes for each submission made by institutions: the funding bodies intend to use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their research funding to HEIs, with effect from 2015–2016. The assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment. The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks.

[2] To borrow from and paraphrase Nietzsche.

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