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The Real Knowledge Transfer

By Stefano Harney

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In Britain, knowledge transfer (KT) is taking a new turn. As a university policy, KT emphasized intellectual property rights. The dream of the managers of the university was to patent knowledge produced in university departments, laboratories, and lecture halls. This new proprietary knowledge would then either earn rent from the private sector, and in some cases the public sector, or lead to the founding of new private firms, owned in part by the university, the so-called spin-off.

This dream has been notoriously elusive for most universities in Britain, with many spending more on KT offices than they earn in KT revenues, and some KT directors said by the Times Higher Education magazine to make more than senior professors. Indeed the UK government's own Lambert Report on business-university collaboration, published in 2003, noted that only a few university spin-offs receive any private investment. The rest continued to depend on public funding of one form or another, or failed. Is this why the Labour government in Britain, now in opposition, introduced the vaguer notion of social and economic impact, to broaden but also soften a failing measurement? In Britain, a national audit of research takes place every five years, designed to identify 'excellence' in research across the country. It is a peer review process on a grand scale, reviewing four pieces of work from every 'research active' scholar in every field in every university.

Like all such accounting practices, it has produced its object. And concerns have been repeatedly raised about the perverse consequences of this national audit, from which research money, and individual merit pay, flows. In order to get into the well regarded journals, and be eligible for this merit pay, scholars became more conformist, more cautious, and inevitably more careerist. While writing books remained an option, few could produce four such books in a five year period, and in some fields, for instance economics, and most of business studies, 'books don't count.'

Many learned the rules of the game all too well, played it safe by writing multi-authored articles with an incremental approach to knowledge targeting specific journals, and demonstrating a willing, suppliant approach to revisions suggested by the journals. The trumpeted entrepreneurial ethos of New Labour soon looked at odds with this obvious lack of risk-taking and vision among scholars. Along the way, the failure of mostly engineering and science-based spin-offs and licensing to supplement university income in any substantial way began to put further pressure on the humanities for whom knowledge transfer as IP rent was never a serious financial prospect.

Introducing Impact

Perhaps it should be no surprise then that knowledge transfer should need revising in the government's next audit, re-christened the Research Excellence Framework (REF), set currently for 2014. The REF introduces an additional measurement, social and economic impact. The stated aim of accounting for impact is to gauge the wider relevance and application of research pieces, pieces called of course 'outputs,' measuring for something like 'outcomes.' In some ways this was the equivalent of reformist calls in academic and professional accounting for broadening what might be measured, the social audit. At the same time, the new policy was designed to line up the university sector with business, in keeping with its new bureaucratic location, inside a ministry for business development, a place it remains in the new Tory-Liberal Democratic alliance government.

At least, this is the official story. Other explanations have been put forward. Some claim this attention to the broader impact of higher education on society, its broader use to society, is a belated recognition that this fully state-funded system in Britain benefits the middle classes disproportionately. The working class pays but does not attend, except as support workers on the campuses. Others say it was a backdoor attempt to introduce something like an industrial policy, late in the day, and long after it had become apparent that the country's economy was dominated by the financial industry in London and Edinburgh.

Most commonly, this latest innovation in the national audit has been received, particularly by academics themselves, as simply the newest sharpening of the management tool. In this reading the demand for impact fits with a general view of the research audit as part of an apparatus of productive discipline. Impact will now subject the humanities to the same pressure as knowledge transfer did engineering and science. And meanwhile the professional schools, business, law, medicine, use their regulative status to prove impact easily, putting yet more pressure on the humanities. There is something to this reading. It is certainly true that a centrally planned system of research and teaching funding can realize the ambition of an authoritative national ranking, introducing more direct competition than one would find in the mixed education economy of the United States. Under such direct competition, management has a claim on labour that appears less residual than it really is. Thus the common phenomenon of research directors, heads of schools, and deans taking credit for the success of a submission to the audit of other people's writing and research.

Nonetheless, I think all of these explanations both official and unofficial are insufficient. In fact I think the key to understanding the rise of impact lies with knowledge transfer itself. Because it was not so much that knowledge transfer did not succeed but rather that it succeeded all too well, just not in the way it was intended. Indeed one could say knowledge transfer was more pioneering than even its own pretensions to entrepreneurship. The real knowledge transfer from the university to the private sector has been the transfer of the management of knowledge itself. The university's gift to society in the last thirty years has been as the laboratory for knowledge management itself, and as the factory for the production of a subsequent 'research active' subjectivity. Not any particular piece of knowledge property, but the way to manage all knowledge, this is what the university has been transferring all too successfully.

As the private sector has come to discover the potential wealth in commodities that produce and extend attention, mood, communication, social relations, and opinion, the one commodity key to this production, commodity-labour, has increasingly yielded its secrets to that sector. Not only has this commodity-labour been trained in the university to do so, to be research active, in the most degraded sense of research as the mining of oneself and others for instrumental purposes, as in the research assessment exercise in the UK, but the university has experimented not just with the production but also the management of such subjectivities. Those experiments form the basis of the structure of today's private knowledge management firms. Marketing firms, software firms, media firms, creative industries firms resemble nothing so much in the way they operate today as university departments, full of peer review, mentoring, collaboration, experiment, and crucially the bringing of all life into work, so familiar to the academic like no else except perhaps the artist, as Andrew Ross has well noted in his revealing book *No Collar*.

From Statistical Populations to Logistical Populations

But this is not the end of the story, because if this real knowledge transfer was indeed so successful, why the change to social and economic impact? Of course there is no direct answer to this, but I would suggest it is symptomatic of a change in the universities, indeed a change in research itself under capitalism. The research park is dying, its armed response teams, its manicured lawns, and its protection

of intellectual property rights behind reflective glass will not save it. Capital is not going to pay for all this any more, even indirectly through the state, nor does it need to. Capital is following research out into its new dispersed forms, its forms before and after intellectual property rights, and particularly and most importantly into its human form, where the investment is not in glass buildings and spraying ponds, but only in the upkeep of body and mind. And that upkeep, as Christian Marazzi puts it, is now the responsibility of the labour-power housed within it.

So much cheaper, and so much more effective, as even popular concepts like ‘wkinomics’ hint, this new form of research and development occurs in ‘communities’ of people who work together out of a shared passion. Sound familiar? It ought to, and by the way it is very post-disciplinary, in both senses of the word. The self-motivated, self-organized teams of researchers populating this landscape starting everything from slow food movements to free software movements to new music scenes are today the generators of innovation ‘harvested’ by business. Pick up any business magazine and this ‘open innovation’ will be featured. And although this style of working together to invent new knowledge might have been pioneered, incubated we might say, in university departments, it may be bad news for them, and not just because this way of working cannot be rented out. The massive disinvestment undertaken by governments in Europe and North America occurs not just at the behest of bond markets, but with the acquiescence of capital as whole. Everyone in business and government is betting they can get their research for free in these communities of practice, the very communities whose spirit owes so much not just to the university at its best, but to the history of the Left, a history of mutual aid, shared property, and egalitarianism.

But here’s the final thing. The university is not passive in this process. It is still ‘innovating.’ No longer a place producing experts suitable to what Foucault would understand as a set of statistically organized populations, today the university produces what I would call experts for a logistical population, experts in logistics not statistics. And here the important new work of Ned Rossiter, Brett Neilson and their Transit Labour research group is itself pioneering. Business, and government, are no longer a matter of productivity through statistical variation, or at least not this alone, but about making different things fit together, things that look like they would not fit, and making them fit faster, and in more directions. If statistics produced a population engaged in explorations of more and more relative surplus value, finer and finer ways to achieve productivity or public policy, depending on its application, logistics explores absolute surplus value. Logistical populations extend themselves absolutely by breaking through statistical categories and making connections, between life and work, public and private, political and economic, and organic and inorganic. Logistics is the work of extending circuits through new adaptations, translations, governances, scales, and approximations.

And a new logistical subjectivity is being produced in the university in keeping with this dispersed and in some sense humanized form of R&D. This is a logistical subjectivity that mines information for compatibility, one that can plug itself in anywhere, without an adapter, as the laboring conduit between disparate forms of information, goods, cultures, languages, finances and affinities. This logistic subjectivity is the one we talk about when we talk about our teaching, when we say it is not the content of the play or poem or ethnography we are teaching that transfers skills to the student, but some general capacity to move between such contents, connecting them in a process of lifelong learning. What is the distance between what we say and what we mean here? Is our work not something like this connecting? Have we become only logistical experts ourselves?

I don’t think so. Just try to study in the university today. Study — as what Fred Moten and I understand as that permanently immature premature activity of collective thought without (an) end — is almost impossible in the university. The university wants us to come to a decision, an answer, a model, a theory,

a policy. It wants to measure results. It wants deliverables. It wants us plugged in to the circuits. It wants to do logistics. But study unplugs, unplugs and yet remains in touch. Connects by disconnecting, in a dialectical irony CLR James, who exhorted us to only connect, would surely relish. We can still do this in the university through study, by disconnecting, drawing attention to the difficulty, care, and undecidability of connection, by dragging connection down with us into the undercommons of the university. In the undercommons where many of us cannot not study, we find something incommensurate, untranslatable, something that sticks, causes friction, does not easily give itself up, something that stays common, that cannot be operationalized. In the face of logistical dispositifs, study does not work, does not connect. This kind of connection that does not connect in study may seem a fragile alternative, a local one in the face of the global, but measured by the statistical and now logistical resistances of state and capital deployed against it, it hardly seems fragile at all. Indeed its real impact may be precisely what the knowledge transfer and social and economic impact measurements are designed to regulate.

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