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# Reply: Towards “collectively rethinking ourselves”: A response to Eric Lybeck

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The primary purpose of this reply is to build on Lybeck’s insights, picking up in particular his suggestion that we must “collectively rethink ourselves”. However, in order to do this, I need to establish a more controversial narrative of academia’s culpability in preventing social change, which I argue is preventing this rethinking from happening.

As David Palfreyman and Paul Temple (2017, p. 9) explain, medieval universities in Britain were “certainly not ivory towers devoted to pure scholarship and remote from the needs of providing employable graduates to serve the church, the state, aristocratic landowners, and commerce”. While in some sense materially and politically independent due to their means of generating income directly from teaching and their protection by Royal Charter, the guild-like “academic freedom” of medieval universities like the New College, Oxford, was based on an understanding that the output of these universities would be “beneficial to the Church of God and useful to the King and Kingdom”.

As universities became transformed by the Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then integrated into emerging and rapidly modernising European national states in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this understanding remained an important basis for academic freedom. As Bill Readings (1996, p. 68) noted, the “plan” outlined by Wilhelm von Humboldt for the University of Berlin, which subsequently provided the model for “modern” universities across the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even to this day, “synthesised the fundamental reorganisation of the discourse on knowledge by which the University took on an indirect or cultural function for the state: that of the simultaneous search for its objective cultural meaning as a historical entity and the subjective moral training of its subjects as potential bearers of this entity”.

Practically, the modern university, shorn of its idealistic philosophy, was mobilised by national states like Germany to accelerate capitalist development. In exchange for material and political freedom, academics were required to produce “useful knowledge” for both industry and the militaristic state – what we would today call research and development (R&D) – and a new

generation of “knowledge workers” to administer this state and the emerging monopoly capitalist firms that required middle managers and executives to maintain productivity on behalf of shareholders. As Alvin Gouldner (1971, p. 136) insisted, academic freedom, within this arrangement, came to be the “freedom of each intellectual to hold their own special intellectual standards within (and tacitly limited by) a larger loyalty to the essential institutions of the social order of the nation”.

Writing in the 1960s and 70s, Gouldner was especially critical of the role that universities, and perhaps more importantly, the ethic of “value neutrality” that grounded the academic profession, played in the reproduction of the Cold War “military-industrial-academic complex” (Giroux, 2007) in the US. His argument, which I think is even more relevant today in the age of metrics-driven performance management, was that Weber’s (1946) model of “science as a vocation” made sense in 1930s Germany when the university was besieged by extreme political ideologies and academics were under direct attack by the Nazi Party, but in an age of “benign” welfare state capitalism, value neutrality in fact hid the complicity of academics in the ideological war between American capitalism and Soviet communism (the idea of academic freedom providing an ideal type of negative liberty), and the ends to which academic research was being put in a global nuclear and economic arms race. In such circumstances, the only professional ethic was one of *politicisation*.

Gouldner’s critique of value-free sociology and negative academic freedom – which build on earlier critiques of professionalised social science like that of C Wright Mills – influenced the 1960s “New Left” movement in the US and Europe that Lybeck, quoting Robert Bellah, identifies with “expressive individualism”. Lybeck’s point is that the New Left’s “autocritique” of welfare state institutions like public universities as *authoritarian* on the one hand contributed legitimacy to the later critique of such institutions by neoliberalism, and on the other, formed an important cultural background to the “triumphant return of laissez faire” (Burgin, 2015) in the 1970s and 80s under neoliberal governments in the US and UK and for neoliberal ideas of heroic entrepreneurialism and technological utopianism.

However, this critique of the New Left was itself an important ideological element of the neoliberal “counter-revolution” of the 1970s (Duménil and Lévy, 2005), forming part of what might be called a post-68 “restoration” of the authority of experts. What is interesting about this restoration is that it came from intellectuals who before ‘68 had called themselves Marxists. In France, for example, the “New Philosophers” of the 1970s dismissed the ‘68 student movement as the revolt of a spoiled and pampered generation (Cowden and Ridley, forthcoming). However, as Kristin Ross (2002) has convincingly shown, the student movement that spread across the world in the 1960s represented a genuine social movement for democratisation, originating in the civil rights movement in the US, and subsequently demolishing the arbitrary boundaries between universities and the wider public by linking with revolutionary movements abroad, for example in Vietnam and Algeria, and in France, the industrial working class at home.

Contemporary “right-wing populism”<sup>1</sup>, with its co-optation of popular anger and clever use of social media to propagate “fake news”, might suggest a need for a return to a Weberian defence of value freedom. This, I argue, is a *red herring*. Neoliberal states today seek to mobilise universities in a desperate effort to resuscitate a globalised and saturated system of monopoly finance capitalism in deep crisis. This is a point missed by many contemporary critiques of “marketisation”. The Convention for Higher Education, for example, claimed in 2016 that the “present Conservative Government, like the Coalition Government that preceded it, has an ideological predisposition towards the market and its supposed benefits to consumers, but appears to have no vision of Higher Education and its benefits to students and to the whole of society”. *This is incorrect*. As I have tried to show in my own work<sup>2</sup>, the UK Government has over many years designed an elaborate and interlocking system of performance management exercises, the Research Excellence, Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes and Knowledge Exchange Frameworks (REF, TEF, KEF), to incentivise and discipline where appropriate the output of universities towards national, *neoliberal* socio-economic objectives.

Within this context, academics are caught in an ideological pincer movement. They are painted by market reformers as defenders of “producer power” (Willetts, 2017). As Lybeck explains, neoliberals “challenge the collective authority of professions as being self-interested guilds, in which any reference to public purpose, social or civic function, [is] mere ideological window-dressing for self-interested, rationally-calculating, greedy actors”. In response to both the attack on the academic profession and the rise of “fake knowledge”, academics have responded by defending this profession and the need for

value-free, “objective” knowledge. Thus, they fall into the trap set by neoliberalism. At the same time, their aloofness from the messy knowledge of political struggle alienates them further from the public that they turn to in their defence of academic freedom and the idea of the “public university”.

However, the “public university” is a fuzzy “ideal type” that bolts together the ideal elements of all previous university models while ignoring the continuing role of universities through history in maintaining the status quo. Acknowledging this not just theoretically (of course, this is not a new idea), but also *socially and politically*, is a crucial first step towards “collectively rethinking ourselves”. But also, academics need to recognise the intelligence of not just everyday practice – in the sense of “tacit knowledge” – but of non-academic intellectualism. As critics have pointed out, “populism” is a loaded concept that serves little explanatory purpose, except to dismiss popular anger and to legitimise neo-fascism (Foster, 2017). It is much more useful to think of “populism” as pointing to a kind of “proto-public opinion”; an emergent political consciousness that can either be developed, nurtured and strengthened into what I’ve elsewhere conceptualised as “intelligent populism” (Ridley, 2016), or left to be manipulated and co-opted by neo-fascist movements and reactionary political parties.

What is crucial to understand is the role of experts within this dialectic. As John Dewey (2016) argued, while members of the public may not understand the finer details of public policy, for example, they have an intimate and immediate knowledge of the *consequences* of public policy, especially when such policy is out of touch with real needs. For Dewey, without this “insider” knowledge, social science academics responsible for designing or contributing to such policy cannot verify the “truth” of the public policy that has been created. Within national level performance management frameworks like the REF, TEF, and KEF, such one-sided, unverified “knowledge” becomes systematised. While the public may not understand the mechanisms pushing academics away from addressing their real needs, the fact that needs are not being met produces an intuitive awareness that academics as experts – along with experts in the civil service – are vacating their responsibility towards the public.

This is why arguments for the “public university” sound hollow to those outside the university, as it they only evoke an experienced contradiction between the public responsibility of academics as publicly-funded or subsidised experts and their defence of their material, professional interest. Unfortunately, and this is the point that I imagine will be controversial with academic readers, the above critique of academic freedom suggests

that there is an element of truth to the neoliberal critique of “producer power”, a truth that is verified by the difficulty in linking the defence of the academic profession against marketisation with wider struggles against austerity. And, of course, it is this contradiction that makes it easier for neo-fascist movements and political parties to dismiss academic expertise, by-pass traditional sources of knowledge consumption and directly manipulate the public with “fake news” through social media.

However, Dewey’s critique of academic freedom also points to the way forward for academics. By dissolving the alienated relationship between academics and the public within processes of knowledge production, social science academics can begin to produce “truer”, more socially-useful knowledge and rebuild public trust in the academic profession. Due to its disciplinary interest in society, it can lead the way for the wider academic profession. While some disciplines, for example the hard sciences, may not immediately see their connection to social practices, as historical initiatives like the Lucas Plan showed, it is possible and desirable from an environmentalist point of view to reconnected science and technology to social needs. Of course, such a process of dissolution will go immediately against local university management imperatives and national level performance management systems, which is why academics must accept that the defence of the academic profession “in the public interest” must inevitably involve *politicisation*.

Politicisation does not mean abandoning rigorous methods or accepted scientific or social-scientific knowledge. Not only is socially-useful knowledge “truer” (Fesmire, 2015), but for Dewey, values – which arise out of social needs – and the ends to which value-driven research is applied to securing, should be subject to a rational, consistent and generalised “pattern of inquiry” extracted from the best practices of human problem solving, public policy creation and scientific research. It is this method that provides the positive basis for the academic profession as a skilled trade or craft, not its commitment to “useless” knowledge. It is also this method that the public desperately needs to develop the “proto-public opinion” into a set of political demands for democratisation and proposals for socially-useful production.

All of the above, I think, is suggested already by Lybeck in his contribution. However, the sharper critique of academic freedom presented above points more clearly for the need to think beyond, as Lybeck suggests, a return to “more traditional ‘trade’ and ‘craft’ guilds, such as Les Compagnons du Devoir and other forms of apprenticeships and non-academic education”. On the basis of what I’ve argued, I suggest what is needed is a concept of *democratic collegiality* to ground practices of

co-operative inquiry, not between academics and the public, but within an intelligent politicised public with academics inquiring side-by-side with their non-academic “colleagues”. We need to radically expand the “we” of public knowledge production to imagine “us” as an inquiring academic and non-academic public using the tools of academic inquiry to “collectively rethink ourselves”, working together to rebuild society based on the socially-useful knowledge produced through this process.

Furthermore, I propose the creation of a “Council of Scholars” to replace REF, TEF and KEF frameworks and to address local dysfunctional governance structures. This Council of Scholars would formalise the idea of democratic collegiality suggested above, creating an expanded legal definition of “scholar” to include non-academic staff responsible for ensuring the general reproduction of university life (administrative and facilities staff), teachers and non-teaching staff in pre-16 and adult education, people working in the “third sector” on social problems who could benefit from a dialogic relationship with education workers, and “amateur” inquirers within the general public. Although such a structure may seem to undermine academic “self-governance”, as explained above, by democratising knowledge production, the quality and security of knowledge can be improved and its independence from “anti-social” influences more easily ensured.

Individual universities led by local Councils of Scholars, rather than executive boards dominated by self-aggrandising vice chancellors, would be far more responsive to the needs of local communities, preventing the conflicts between “town and gown” described by Lybeck, which are exacerbated by marketisation. Local Councils of Scholars would also drive the democratisation of universities, replacing on the one hand the market norms that have seeped into every aspect of life inside university walls, and on the other hand, opening up universities as public resources to local and regional communities, thus potentially reinvigorating structures of representative democracy that have also been hollowed out by neoliberalism.

Once democratic norms have begun to establish themselves within and around our universities, we can start thinking seriously about alternative models of ownership and control, such as co-operative universities. There is not enough room here to even begin to explore this idea, but I have started to in my other work, and there is a growing body of action-oriented research on the topic being produced by members and friends of the Co-operative College in the UK. The idea of a Council of Scholars to replace metrics-based regulation could also strengthen the UK Labour Party’s proposals for a National

Education Service (NES). On the one hand, a radical change of regulation like the Council of Scholars will need to have government support, and on the other, any proposals for a return to publicly-funded higher education free at the point of entry will need to roll back competition-based structures like the REF, TEF and KEF and have something to put in their place.

Perhaps more importantly, the expanded concept of the “scholar” that underpins the idea of a Council of Scholars would provide a strong basis for the NES as a “cradle to grave” system of education. As Melissa Benn (2018) has powerfully argued, aside from catastrophic underfunding,

pre-16 teaching has suffered a similar de-professionalisation to that of academia. While “scholarship” is not always associated with pre-16 education, nor with further and adult education, the inclusion of teachers within a Council of Scholars would help to re-establish teaching as a highly-skilled profession comparable to that of lecturing, replace the anxiety-inducing and counterproductive Ofsted inspections with positive structures of self-regulation and continuing professional development, and re-establish the crucial collaborative relationship between schools and universities within teacher training, education research and educational policy creation.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on research undertaken within the DFG research unit “Mechanisms of Elite Formation in the German Educational System” (FOR 1612), sub-project “Elite Formation and Universities”.

<sup>2</sup> See my “Willets the Conqueror” series, available on the *HE Marketisation* blog, which will hopefully also be soon published in book form: <https://hemarketisation.wordpress.com/willets-the-conqueror/>

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## About the Author

David Ridley is an independent researcher and journalist who until recently worked in higher education as a lecturer in English and Journalism. He is currently writing up his thesis, which is entitled ‘The Method of Democracy: John Dewey’s Critical Social Theory’, for a PhD at the University of Birmingham while also working on the idea of a ‘socially useful university’ alongside political activists and trade unionists.