

Book Review: A Manifesto for the Public University by John Holmwood

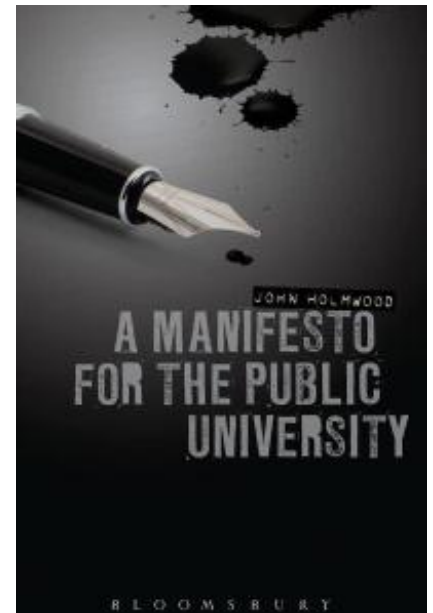
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What does the future hold for higher education? Is the university set to become like the panopticon, where academics are constantly surveyed and regulated in the name of efficiency? Tony Murphy finds that A Manifesto for the Public University is a must for all those with vested interests in HE: students, researchers, and VCs, as well as policy makers actively engaged in shaping the future.



A Manifesto for the Public University. John Holmwood. Bloomsbury Academic. October 2011.

As we begin to deal with the fall-out from Lord Browne's [Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance](#), Professor John Holmwood presents a collection of essays written by members of the [Campaign for the Public University](#). Holmwood and colleagues make the case for the public benefits of the universities, and therefore the case for public funding. Although we have witnessed previous moves towards the commodification of research and consumerism within HE, it is argued that the direction of Lord Browne's review represents a profound shift for the university system away from the principles and objectives of the Robbins Report. The projected marketization of the system undercuts the very notion of HE as a public good and challenges the value of education in itself. As such, the book is true to its title, demonstrating the value of the university system beyond contributing to national GDP, instead serving an important social mission.



The authors highlight the folly of reducing the purposes of HE to solely instrumental functions. Holmwood is quick to demonstrate this, and he cites two key features of the present direction: the marketization of the public university system, and the replacement of direct funding of undergraduate courses by student fees. For Holmwood, such state withdrawal from direct funding of universities is deeply ideological. His key concern is not necessarily the levels of funding, rather the purposes of the university system and the consequences of allowing such purposes to be defined by the market. In a related sense, he argues "...it is right that students be at the heart of higher education, but in a role other than as consumers.

In his chapter, Michael Burawoy considers the possible roles of the public university, and argues that universities have become subject the twin pressures of commodification and regulation. As a result, the pursuit for reflexive knowledge is being sacrificed by the instrumentalization of the universities. In chapter 3, Nicola Miller and John Sabathy claim that British universities are on the verge of losing their freedom to pursue intellectual insight; student choice will dictate what is taught, and civil servants will dictate what is researched. Such features are not entirely new, but current government policy will accelerate them. It is argued that the university will soon become the [panopticon](#), where academics are constantly surveyed and regulated in the name of efficiency.

In Chapter 4, Philip Moriarty focuses on science disciplines and explores the heightened focus on *impact* across research outcomes, and the ill-effects of this. He notes how the research councils

and HEFCE have led universities to not only being business facing, but business led, “involving an evolution of academic science from a public good to a private good.” Desmond King picks-up on that theme in chapter 5, demonstrating the pronounced shift in funding for applied research in the social sciences, and the wider politics of publically funded social research.

In a passionate discussion of HE, equal opportunities and unequal outcomes, Stephen McKay and Karen Rowlingson suggest that a marketized HE will serve to ensure inequalities and diminish the opportunities for lower income groups to challenge the status quo. Greater widening access efforts are therefore crucial, and the restoration of the EMA is necessary in meeting that end. Public funding of HE is justified through the system’s social mission.

In chapter 7, Diane Reay cites Tawney’s work in critiquing the current direction of the university system. Reay argues that we are some way from the socially just system as described by Tawney; one in which education is viewed as an end in itself, where status or wealth is not a barrier to entry. Reay includes a range of damning statistics to highlight stark inequalities within our present system and how this permeates life chances. For example, students from private schools are fifty five times more likely to attend Oxbridge than a state school counterpart in receipt of free school meals. Whilst tellingly, Lord Browne himself attended Cambridge, and four of his six fellow panel members are Oxbridge alumni.

Reay asserts that our elite institutions provide little opportunities for social mixing across socio-economic status and race. This has profound implications for social mobility and equality. Lord Browne’s proposals will exacerbate this situation, manifesting itself through the distinction between the more expensive elite institutions, pre-dominantly attended by privately educated students, and the lesser and cheaper institutions with sizeable cohorts of working class students. Although this is something that many of us would already recognise.

For me, chapter seven is the pick of the essays. Reay is impassioned in her account, furthermore, what she cites around the reproduction of disadvantage is already highly visibly within the current system. Thus, it does not require a great deal of imagination to accept her bleak assessment of the current trajectory given recent reforms. I struggled to read her account and do anything other than agree entirely with what she argues.

To its credit, the book includes a riposte from the former President of Universities UK, Sir Steve Smith. He broadly supports the present reforms, claiming that change was inevitable given the unsustainable position of previous policies, and that we should be optimistic about the future. He argues that Lord Browne is not responsible for reductions in direct state funding of HE, rather his efforts have been to substitute other funding for lost government revenues. The author sets out to debunk what he describes as three key myths established in the public debate: 1) funding for HE has been reduced 2) this spells the end for the humanities and social sciences 3) the new system places impenetrable barriers in the way of students from poorer backgrounds. His account is fairly well reasoned, but as he himself acknowledges, only time will tell.

Although the text is less seamless than it would have been with a single author, it is none-the-less compelling reading; mostly the essays are well reasoned. The reader is left in no doubt that despite policies under previous administrations having lit the fuse; the contents of the Browne review represent profound change for the HE landscape as marketization lifts off. This text is a must for all those with vested interests in HE: students, researchers, VCs, as well as those policy makers actively engaged in shaping the future.

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