

# UNIVERSITIES AND THE NECESSARY COUNTER-CULTURE AGAINST NEOLIBERALISM

LA UNIVERSIDAD Y LA NECESARIA CONTRA-CULTURA FRENTE AL NEOLIBERALISMO

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## Abstract

In various nation-states (including the UK) universities (or institutions of higher education) are being reformed along similar lines – to ensure that their aims and substance are closer to the ‘needs’ of the economy. This development undermines the historic aims of universities as sites where the widest range of people get access to the widest range of knowledge that society and the world needs. The crisis of the university is part therefore of the wider crisis of voice in neoliberal democracies. Moving beyond that crisis requires a counter-culture that defends and rebuilds the values of the university against the force of neoliberal culture. This article argues that in the today’s global crisis of finance and democratic legitimacy what societies need is precisely the open thinking about alternative futures that universities were once empowered to provide. The defence of the university against neoliberal attack is therefore part of the wider defence of democracy.

## Resumen

*En varios Estados Nación (incluyendo al Reino Unido), las universidades (o instituciones de Enseñanza Superior) están sufriendo reformas similares – que orientan sus objetivos y su esencia hacia las ‘necesidades’ de la economía. Esta transformación soslaya el cometido histórico de la Universidad como espacio en el que un amplio espectro de gentes accede a una amplia gama de conocimiento fundamental para la sociedad y para el mundo. La crisis de la Universidad es por tanto parte de la gran crisis de voz en las democracias neoliberales. Para superar la crisis es preciso desarrollar una contra-cultura que defienda y reconstruya los valores de la universidad y se oponga a la fuerza de la cultura neoliberal. Este artículo argumenta que en la actual crisis financiera y de legitimidad democrática, lo que la sociedad necesita es precisamente pensar de forma abierta sobre los futuros alternativos que las universidades fueron una vez llamadas a ofrecer. La defensa de la Universidad frente al ataque neoliberal es también parte de la defensa de la democracia.*

## Keywords

Neoliberalism, Crisis of voice, Counter-culture, Global crisis, Alternative futures

## Palabras Clave

Neoliberalismo, Crisis de voz, Contra-cultura, Crisis Global, Futuros Alternativos.

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## 1. Introduction

In Britain, the idea of the university has a long and publicly valued history. While no one today would defend education in terms the same as those of a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer such as Matthew Arnold, the idea that the state (and more generally the public) has some stake in universities performing their role *well* can draw on a long history of debate within the UK and wider Europe (Arnold (1970) [1860]; Schiller 1967 [1793]). What future does that line of thinking have in a neoliberal democracy such as Britain today?

What counts as ‘well’ can be as narrowly defined as you like. It is apparently possible to defend a notion of the university within a neoliberal framework, as an institution that oils the wheels of the economy, by training people for work within it. That is the experiment in which the UK is officially engaged right now, but at the expense of two wider ideals for the university as an open place of education (that is, self-transformation) and of research. Those wider ideals feed into the notion of a *democracy* of active citizens, able, if they wish, to contribute to common processes of decision-making. But it is exactly such a notion of democracy that neoliberal doctrine reduces to externality (Couldry, 2010). In this dark context, Matthew Arnold’s insistence on disinterested knowledge (“to know the best that is known and thought in the world”, decided by criteria that leave aside “all questions of practice consequences and applications”), however elitist its application, is far from trivial; so too Friedrich Schiller’s perhaps quaint insistence that “art, like science, is absolved from all positive constraint . . . both rejoice in absolute immunity from human arbitrariness” (Schiller, 1967, p. 55). Yet these views are utterly at odds with today’s prevailing instrumentalism in education and government.

So the battle against the neoliberal university is part of defending *some* working notion of democracy against another decade of neoliberal assault.

Abandon the university, and we abandon something important about democracy. This is a counter-cultural battle, because neoliberalism itself takes effect as a *culture* embedded in everyday systems and practices of management and adjustment which can be resisted only by a sustained attempt to build a counter-culture that resists neoliberal culture within the university.

The lives of vast numbers of people have been changed by the institutional forms that the university principle has taken, particularly over the past half century, in a country such as the UK. Universities represent the shared commitment of a medium-sized population that practical access to the widest range of human knowledge and creativity should not be restricted by social class or family wealth.

Ironically, the recent shift in the UK to a full market system of university funding, and away from a publicly funded university system – albeit a market sustained by upfront government loans and regulated as to price and supply like a Soviet factory plant – was justified by the UK government under the guise of *extending* access. Yet these changes are likely in the long run to ensure the narrowing, and eventual undermining, of what there is for students to ‘access’. In the ‘new world’ that David Willetts, Minister for Universities invokes (quoted *Guardian* 26 November 2010), a market of new providers will spring up to offer the skills that school leavers need more efficiently than some of our existing universities, and student-consumers will be empowered to shop around for the best deals, as they equip themselves for work in the economy. But there are major reasons to doubt the likelihood of this outcome. At stake is not only a particular set of institutions, but a whole generation’s sense of their future.

## 2. The linguistic traps of neoliberal culture

**N**eoliberal culture works indirectly, by doing other than it says. The Browne report was published and presented to the UK government in October 2010<sup>1</sup>. It recommended two fundamental things: first, the lifting of the undergraduate fees cap (subsequently reinstated by the government, but at the price of a likely doubling and potential tripling of fees for most students) and second, the withdrawal of so-called ‘block grant’ (ie prior and general) governmental teaching support from all courses. Only ‘priority’ courses (medical, some other sciences, and ‘strategically important language courses’) will retain this prior support. It is the second proposal that makes the first essential, so it is the second reform on which we should concentrate our analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education 12 October 2010  
[www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report](http://www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report)

The Browne report was too smart to talk of cuts or downsizing the university. Its language is much more soothing: its aim is “a sustainable funding solution for the future” (page 17). The report’s first principle is that “there should be more investment in higher education” (page 24) – who could disagree with that? The mechanism to achieve this sounds encouraging too: “institutions will have to convince students of the benefits of investing more” (page 24). “We want”, the report says, “to put students at the heart of the system. Students are best placed to make the judgement about what they want to get from participating in higher education” (page 25). Even better, “choice is in the hands of the students” (page 3), “the money will follow the student” (page 4).

Yet the point of the report’s recommendations was to abolish for ever remove the UK government’s commitment to fund university teaching, except by way of upfront loans to student ‘customers’. The strange gap between the reality of funding removal and the report’s expansive language is precisely the point. What bridges the gap is the underlying principle that the report leaves unspoken: the principle of market liberalism which takes its most radical form in the work of the US economist Milton Friedman. Friedman (1982) applied (arguably, abused) Adam Smith’s principle of the ‘invisible hand of the market’ to argue for a drastic shrinking of government. According to Friedman, the only way that good *social* ends can be achieved is to leave individuals to compete through markets to get what they *individually* want: so the social is a chimera, as Friedrich von Hayek argued more elaborately (von Hayek, 1960).

According to a similar logic, the Browne report suggested that, with the exception of those degree courses that the government decides are a priority for subsidy because they support the market economy, the best way to get the improved quality of university teaching is through the choices each *individual* makes in deciding where to apply for university. The idea that by exercising our freedom of choice as individuals we also get what we want as a society—in this case, a higher-quality education system—is superficially attractive. But it is a myth of market liberalism that individual choice under conditions of market competition is the best or even the only way to achieve social ends. Here in full is the report’s ‘first principle’:

Our proposals introduce more investment for higher education. HEIs [ie higher education institutions] must persuade students that they should ‘pay more’ in order to ‘get more’. That money will follow the student.

‘Pay more’ is an approximation: read instead ‘draw down more’ via loans to be repaid from money students haven’t yet got and only undertaken

by students based on their expectations of the money they will earn in the future. The courses that will be financially viable from October 2012 (when these reforms take full effect) will be the courses that student ‘purchasers’ think are most likely to generate for them higher earnings after they leave. That means (although Browne never says this) that the choice of courses available to students in 10 years time, say, will be determined by the choices of those in 5 years time, based principally on the latter’s expectations of what level of pay a prospective degree will secure for them.

This tying of the educational funding to a very narrow financially-driven model of educational choice is no accident. For Browne argues directly that “there needs to be a closer fit between what is taught in higher education and the skills *needed in the economy*” (page 23, italics added). Priority degrees for government to subsidise are those where “skills and knowledge’ are ‘currently in shortage or predicted to be in the future” (page 47). All that matters are the needs of the economy: “courses that deliver improved employability will prosper: those that make false promises will disappear” (page 31).

The Browne report —commissioned by the previous New Labour government— moves decisively away from the principle that governments should support universities to provide access at the highest level to the full range of human knowledge, understanding and creativity and so ensure that young people have the opportunity to develop their full intellectual and creative potential, regardless of family wealth. In its place comes a much cruder principle: the university functions that meet the immediate needs of the economy, and a very narrowly defined definition of economic needs at that!

However the violence of this policy shift was hardly been discussed in the mainstream media. Nor was it effectively challenged by the Labour party by now in opposition (for a rare exception, see Denham 2010). This relative silence from mainstream political voices suggests the reason why neoliberal reforms have typically made progress in Britain unopposed: namely, the reluctance of people, *particularly* on the ‘left’ (the New Labour project being a classic case study of this reluctance: Couldry 2010, chapter 2), to articulate in public values which reject the primacy of the market as the sole principle of social and political organisation. The Browne report states that a system for distributing resources based on individual market choice will generate the university system that society needs: this is classic Milton Friedman, even if not classic von Hayek (Hayek less recklessly than Friedman insisted that markets could *not* satisfy key infrastructural needs such as the road system)!<sup>2</sup> We will not make much progress

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2 Compare Hayek (1949, pp. 107-118) with Friedman (1982, p. 2).

in challenging such claims unless we are prepared to challenge, regularly and systematically, the basic *second-order value* that animates Britain's moribund politics: that is, the regular installing of market values in priority over all other values. It is this second-order value that underlie the current crisis of voice and democracy in Britain elsewhere, and so underlies the impending crisis of the university too.

### 3. Counter-cultural values

Today's political challenge to the life of the university is hardly unexpected, even if its full force was not anticipated. Anthony Grafton arguably the world's leading scholar in historiography, already saw the crisis coming in a remarkable piece published in *March* 2010: Grafton (2010). UK academics have for fifteen years been facing – or perhaps *not* facing – a deformation of academic values through the production-line model of research under the Research Assessment Exercise ('RAE') and now the 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF). The REF, as English academics were debating just two years ago (during a consultation on the REF proposals), represents a huge challenge to autonomous academic values, installing 'impact' as a lead criterion of research that has value. The *point* of the REF is to remove core research funding from 'research units' whose research lacks demonstrable impact (that is, 'impact' defined primarily by reference to the economy and policy-making, see Couldry 2011 for discussion). So it is hardly a major surprise that core *teaching* funding has now to be withdrawn from institutions *except* where they teach in certain priority areas: priorities not for society, but for the national economy. No one is arguing such areas do *not* need support: the issue is whether they should be supported at the cost of every other type of degree, whether it is design, philosophy, history, most languages, culture, arts, social sciences, literature and so on.

In the university, as elsewhere, neoliberal doctrine works by being installed as culture<sup>3</sup> and in particular (since universities are bureaucracies) as an implacable 'rationality': an ordering force based on the way particular things 'have to be', because of the way that other things 'are'. As Wendy Brown has argued, the only starting-point for resisting neoliberalism is to build explicitly, deliberately, a "*counter-rationality* – a different figuration of human beings, citizenship, economic life, and the political" (Brown 2003, para 42, added italics). That counter-rationality must be cunning. It must bring out the contradictions within neoliberalism itself. There is not only the incoherence of believing that

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<sup>3</sup> See especially Giroux (2004).

markets always self-correct, but the deeper incoherence that provides cover for neoliberalism's official slogans at the level of 'rationality' and its seemingly uncontroversial values: the second-order 'value' that dictates economic ends take priority over all other ends, whether social political or cultural; and, relatedly, that economic ends must be determined autonomously by reference only to economic functioning considered in isolation, without reference to the wider human goods that the economy *is for*.

Fortunately, we do have the resources to name the deeper incoherences of neoliberalism: the most useful tools come from Foucault's now widely-known lectures on neoliberalism (Foucault, 2007), and Amartya Sen's critiques of the thin account of freedom and rationality that neoliberal doctrine (which claims to promote those two values) actually provides. One of Sen's forebears is the very same Adam Smith that neoliberalism, even in its most popular versions, claims as its talisman! Sen in his 1987 book *On Ethics and Economics* argues that economics lost its way when, shortly after Adam Smith, it forgot its connection with ethics – that is, with reflections on the account of the good life that economic production should serve. For the ethics that economics needs, Sen argues, “cannot stop the evaluation [of economic activity] short at some arbitrary point like satisfying efficiency”. The assessment has to be more fully ethical, and take a broader view of the good’ (1987, p. 4). And as Sen wrote in his later book *Freedom and Rationality*, a notion of freedom (such as Lord Browne's) that is reduced to the chance to compete freely for goods and services *in a market* tells us nothing about what we are *free for*. For Sen by contrast, freedom is “the actual ability of [a] person to achieve those things that she *has reason to value*” (Sen, 2002, p. 5). This opens up, from another angle, the social, political, cultural and material ends of economic production. Sen, from deep within economics, insists that we always ask: an economy for what? productivity for what? efficiency for what? impact for what? Just the questions that neoliberal doctrine – in general and as employed in universities – refuses, as incoherent or irrelevant.

Re-asking those questions is the start of resisting the deep embedding of neoliberal culture. But it is not enough, because neoliberalism has ready-made answers to all those questions. Something more is needed when external forces (and some internal forces too) are seeking to close down a university culture where debate about value, what Sen calls ‘our values *about values*’— go on. What is needed is a *counter-culture* within the university, a culture and a life which embeds a counter-rationality to neoliberalism.

To invoke the 1960s term ‘counter-culture’ risks being accused of nostalgia. Clearly today's starting-points are very different. 1960s counter-culture could rely on the intellectual authority (in Britain, France, and the USA for example) of a smaller, more elitist university system on the brink of historic expansion. Now

we face in England drastic university reforms as a prelude to likely contraction whose basic logic assumes the *diminished* authority and relevance of university culture. This, then, is reason why the struggle for the English university must connect with movements outside the university: arguments for a socially inclusive university must reconnect with the wider range of citizens, just as repairing the legitimacy of political decision-making requires the political participation of a new range of actors. A critical and reinvigorated vision of the social purpose of university teaching as a tool for expanding and sustaining public knowledge is at the heart of this struggle<sup>4</sup>.

The struggle against neoliberalism is the struggle for a view of democratic politics as the organization of resources in ways that take account of people, as human beings with a capacity to give an account of themselves. Without such a vision, politics loses any connection with hope. The struggle for the university is a struggle for individuals' educational futures, and individuals' possibilities of hope through self-transformation. When a leading theorist of the market-state explains bluntly that "there will be more public participation in government, but it will count for less" (Bobbitt, 2003, p. 234), he is helping critics of neoliberalism through his honesty. In response, we must take the more basic argumentative step of acknowledging that such a oxymoronic democracy is *not* a democracy – at all. Similarly a university oriented to purely instrumental ends is not a university – at all.

In my final section, I would like to explore in a little more detail how, as someone working in a university, I understand this practical and conceptual link between the struggle to defend universities and the struggle to defend democracy.

#### 4. The University as a Site of Alternative Futures

It is well known that in most European languages the word for higher education institutions, 'university' (universidad, université, universität), derives from an early French adaptation of the Latin word 'universitas', meaning 'the whole of things', even the universe itself<sup>5</sup>.

Without rehearsing here the long history of reflection about the university as an institution, how should we interpret today this invocation of 'wholeness' that is unambiguously present in the name that our higher education institutions carry?

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4 See Henry Giroux's lifelong work on 'critical pedagogy' and Edward Said's last book (Said, 2004).

5 See Cassells Latin Dictionary, latest edition.

There are two obvious possibilities. The first is that the university is a place that in principle is open to all who meet relevant educational criteria for entry. The second is that the university is a place where, through knowledge, research and scholarship, a perspective – multiple perspectives – is/are built on ‘everything’, on the overall relations between the myriad components of today’s complex world. Our actual universities instantiate those two basic principles very imperfectly, of course, but even so, neoliberal reforms of the UK university systems – and similar transformations of other university systems already complete or now under way, for example, in Holland, Denmark, Sweden – *undermine* the capacity of higher education institutions to orient themselves to these two basic principles: by increasing the financial risks associated with going to university, and by instrumentalizing the purposes by reference to which quality in higher education is defined and measured. So much is obvious from my earlier discussion. What is perhaps less obvious is how the proposed narrowing of the university’s focus around economic purpose is itself *irrational* when set against the actual needs of our time.

Today’s crisis of voice in neoliberal democracies (Couldry, 2010) coincides with the deepest economic crisis in Europe and the world since at least the 1930s and a long-term decline in the legitimacy of political institutions (Rosanvallon, 2011). These intersecting crises are connected. The latter (economic and political) crises were generated in part (though only in part) by the ascendancy of market fundamentalism as a political doctrine since the 1970s and the resulting removal of all practical constraints on the movement of financial capital over the next three decades; while the same neoliberal doctrine is at the root of the cultural contradictions that members of today’s democracies must live out as a crisis of voice. Indeed the manifest failure of contemporary democratic institutions to address the economic and financial crisis in ways that are both practically adequate and consistent with their political mandates (in countries as diverse as Greece, UK, Spain, and the USA) can be seen as a higher stage of the growing crisis of voice.

Limiting our focus to Europe, we live now in times when, as citizens whether or not professionally engaged in politics, we need to generate new solutions to three very deep and interconnected problems. First, how can our economic resources and processes of distribution and exchange be reorganized in ways that do not generate levels of insecurity – at global and other scales – that are unsustainable, that is, impossible to live with individually and collectively? Second, how can the adjustment to economic institutions and processes required to answer the first problem be socially implemented – through what reorganization of power and authority, what reorganization of collective capacities for knowledge-generation and resource allocation? Third, as an application of

the second problem, how can our political institutions be transformed so that they more reliably generate decisions that are both democratically legitimate (for without legitimacy, they are not sustainable as institutions in the long run) and practically adequate to the large-scale organizational challenges that the government of economy and society now ineluctably throws up?

In short, we need new thinking that addresses 'the whole', both normatively and practically – examining both the basic ends to which social and economic processes should be directed and the multiple and complex interrelations that make up 'society' and 'economy'. We need to rethink the nature of justice, solidarity and sustainable resource, and the modes of organising human cooperation and competition that flow from that rethinking.

As often on the topic of voice, the US sociologist Richard Sennett provides sharp guidance. He argued recently for a reorientation of universities away from narrow practical ends defined by past economic practice and towards wider skills:

I'd like to see universities stop preparing young people for the work world, at least as they now attempt to do. Part of the problem is misplaced specificity . . . We would do much better to provide young people with intellectual challenge and depth – which is what universities are properly about (Sennett, 2012).

Conceived the right way – that is, in direct and determined opposition to the instrumentalist dead-end for which short-sighted governments are currently preparing them – universities can be places where people from a broad range of social backgrounds come together and are equipped to think about the most difficult problems that, as human beings, we collectively and individually face.

Occasionally, in history, universities have played something like this role, perhaps for a brief period in the 1960s when new disciplines were developed to address European and North American societies' growing diversity. Never has an anti-instrumental culture in universities been more needed. Look with open eyes at the decision-making processes in most universities today and what you will see is a desert of sub-managerialist jargon, strewn with relics of earlier, bolder visions of what the university is for.

Only by resisting the neoliberal culture that is engulfing today's universities can *societies* hope to equip themselves, through the skills acquired by new generations, to face the true seriousness of 'how things are' in today's troubled world.

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