

How Things Change: Following the Thread (0076)

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Abstract

In this paper I will consider how the landscape of higher education has been transformed over long-time, and who or what has been most agentic in that transformation. In particular I will argue that a left version of history in which campaigns mounted from below re-order structures and resourcing dispensed from above no longer does justice to the state we're in. Rather change is multi-directional and happens at speed, with the immediate chain of events that have got us to the present moment often hard to perceive. If this is where we are, what does this mean for the university as an institution and knowledge as the work that institution does?

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Writing of the new private/public partnerships now involved in delivering education at many different levels of the education system, Ball describes their changing formation and evolution in terms of the “policy ratchet”, a series of incremental moves, none in itself decisive yet cumulatively producing deep change (Ball, 2008). In HE, with the traditional autonomy of the university muted rather than dismantled, policy is perhaps less certainly the place to start from in this account, though it certainly has had a role in shaping both the expansion of the sector and the terms in which that expansion has taken place. The pressures on funding that stem from the

financial crisis clearly matter too. Policy change will follow. Under the Lib-Con alliance, expansion falters and retrenchment lies ahead. But what will universities retrench to? Perhaps the more interesting story and the more interesting questions lie not with the university as a relatively stable institution, but rather with the extent to which the stable constitution of the university itself seems increasingly out of (another) time and out of (another) place.

The scope of the argument required to deal with all this is perhaps best laid out in Bernstein's theoretical work, in particular in *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, (Bernstein, 1996) where he considers in some detail how forms of knowledge change in relation to the wider social order. In attempting to sum up what was then the contemporary scene, Bernstein commented:

“Of fundamental significance, there is a new concept of knowledge and of its relation to those who create it and use it. This new concept is a truly secular concept. Knowledge should flow like money to wherever it can create advantage and profit. ... Moving knowledge about, or even creating it, should not be more difficult than moving and regulating money. .. Once knowledge is separated from inwardness, from commitments, from personal dedication, from the deep structure of the self, then people may be moved about, substituted for each other and excluded from the market.”

Much of what has happened since, within HE as much as the school sector, seems to have escalated the separation of knowledge from what Bernstein describes as “inwardness, ..commitments, ... personal dedication, .. the deep structure of the self.”

These phrases capture the kind of long apprenticeships that disciplinary knowledge once demanded, often served out within the walled communities of the pre 1992 universities, hidden from public gaze. Part of the transformation of the sector and of the knowledge it builds has happened precisely through the university's permeability to other forces. In one sense this is signalled by the current emphasis on demonstrating "impact" from the processes of knowledge production. Knowledge counts if it passes on somewhere else, into someone else's purlieu, where it can be re-framed or re-used for another end. The separation between producer and consumer is itself commodified, even as the relations between teacher and student have been contractualised. Knowledge does indeed "flow like money".

At the same time, Bernstein reminds us to ask both what changes and what stays the same? Universities as closed institutions are unlikely to return. The speed and accessibility of the web alone make this entirely unlikely. Yet arguments over who gets to make what kinds of knowledge or how and where that happens still tread some of the old paths. Looking back to the past is to look back to a tiny elite entitled to take the time to build knowledge at a slow pace in cloistered seclusion. It is also to find intense disagreements about what kinds of knowledge were worthy of this sort of attention – think of the alternative radical education tradition which EP Thompson documented in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1963). There are also surprising points in the history when a much stronger case was made for a broader education for those outside the university than would be voiced today:

They do not want education only in order that they may become better technical workmen and earn higher wages. They do not want it in order that they may rise

out of their own class, always a vulgar ambition, they want it because they know that in the treasures of the mind they can find an aid to good citizenship, a source of pure enjoyment and a refuge from the necessary hardships of a life spent in the midst of clanging machinery in our hideous cities of toil. I ask whether there is a single struggling young student in this country to whom a library of good books has not made an elemental democratic appeal.

Fisher, 1917, quoted in Maclure, 1986.

Perhaps part of the difficulty we face is not in sharing an inward commitment to knowledge in all its forms but rather democratising the processes by which reliable knowledge is both made and distributed. Ann Oakley's work continues to provide some key principles here:

“The goal of an emancipatory (social) science calls for us to abandon sterile word-games and concentrate on the business in hand which is how to develop the most reliable and democratic ways of knowing, both in order to bridge the gap between ourselves and others, and to ensure that those who intervene in other people's lives do so with the most benefit and the least harm.” Oakley, 2000, quoted in Oates, 2007.

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Biography

Professor Gemma Moss is the Director of CeCeps - the Centre for Critical Education Policy Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London. Her research interests include literacy and education policy, with particular reference to gender and literacy; the study of texts in their context of use; and the shifting relationships between policy makers, practitioners and stakeholders that are re-shaping the literacy curriculum.