

**Managing the Academics: Commodification and Control in the Development of
University Education in the UK**

By

**Hugh Willmott
Judge Institute of Management
University of Cambridge, UK**

A later version of this article appears in Human Relations, 48, 9: 993-1028 (1995)

For more information on published articles by Hugh Willmott please refer to
<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/close/hr22/hcwhome>

MANAGING THE ACADEMICS;
COMMODIFICATION AND CONTROL
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN THE UK

Hugh Willmott

Manchester School of Management

UMIST

England

Paper prepared for presentation at the 11th Labour Process Conference, Aston University.

Please do not quote without permission.

MANAGING THE ACADEMICS;
COMMODIFICATION AND CONTROL
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN THE UK

Abstract

The paper analyses major developments in higher education in the UK during the past decade or so. It explores the connection between changes in the organization and control of academic labour processes (e.g. teaching, administration and research) and the pressures exerted by the dynamics of capitalist development to commodify and control the work of academics. The first section considers the relevance of labour process analysis for understanding these changes. Attention is then paid to the historical development of academic work and, in particular, the role played until quite recently by the University Grants Council in providing academics with a significant measure of protection from pressures to make their work more commensurable with the commodity form of value. In the remaining sections of the paper, the focus is upon major developments of the past decade or so: (i) the context, character and impact of the 1981 cuts in University expenditure; (ii) the research selectivity exercises of 1986, 1989 and 1992; (iii) and the work of the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit. A central theme of the paper is the progressive commodification of academic labour and managerial control of academic work resulting from politico-economic pressures to demonstrate that funds are being directed in ways that are deemed to be supportive of, or at least congruent with, the commodifying logic and priorities of capitalism.

Introduction

Typically, studies of change in the organization and management of higher education in Britain refer to the rapid expansion of the student population, reduction in the unit of resource, increased specialisation or 'academicism', improved responsiveness to commercial or economic demands, and so on. Subjected to diverse, but usually unspecified and often unanalysed forces, Universities¹ are said to be changing from traditional, liberal institutions comparatively unbowed by commercial demands or political ideology, into modern dynamic organizations that are more responsive to the requirements of their 'customers' - students, research councils and employers (Peters, 1992).

In many studies of higher education, it is recognised that past and present changes in Universities are inextricably related to broader, historical processes of social and

institutional development (e.g. Scott, 1984; Halsey, 1992). Conspicuously absent, however, is any sustained appreciation of the influence of political economy in shaping the direction and management of higher education². Concepts such as 'modernization' 'specialization', 'professionalization' and, more recently, 'rationalization' are widely deployed to characterise the dynamics of organizational change in (higher) education. Such concepts usefully highlight important aspects of current developments. But they do not directly identify or explore the coupling, which is becoming progressively tightened, between capitalist values and priorities, mediated by political ideologies and programmes, and the organization and control of academic labour. The purpose of this paper is to focus upon this relationship, and to show that it is of direct relevance for understanding contemporary changes in higher education.

The paper begins by exploring the relevance of labour process analysis for understanding changes that have occurred, and are gathering pace, in the funding and control of higher education in the UK. This provides a framework for reviewing the historical development of University education in the UK. Special attention is then paid to the cultural and ideological influences that have restricted and mediated pressures towards the commodification of academic work. Of these influences, the most directly relevant has been the long-lived 'gentlemanly understanding' between state mandarins at the Treasury (and later at the Department of Education and Science) and their trusted counterparts at the UGC - an understanding that, until quite recently, provided academics with a significant measure of protection from commodifying pressures. In the remaining sections of the paper, the focus is upon major developments of the past decade or so that have significantly eroded the protection from pressures to render their work more commensurable with the commodity form of value. Specifically, the paper considers : (i) the context, character and impact of the 1981 cuts in University expenditure; (ii) the research selectivity exercises of 1986, 1989 and 1992; (iii) and the work of the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit. It is argued, in conclusion, that these developments are symptomatic of a tendential process of commodification in which the work of academics is becoming progressively subjected to 'quasi-market' (Jonsson, 1992) means of management control.

Analysing the Work of Academics

In common with other employees, academics sell their labour to provide a level of subsistence for themselves and their dependents. In the absence of a private income, they are obliged to exchange their labour for a wage. However, the notion of 'selling labour' is directly at odds with the self-image of many academics as professionals, for whom payment for their work is, or has been, regarded more as a necessary condition of providing a (vocational) service to society than a means of providing them with an income. In general, studies of academics have examined the changing institutional framework of their work, as well as its content, independently of the wider politico-economic conditions of its development. As Miller (1991 : 110) has observed, academics have not been 'particularly forward in analysing their own work in a rigorous way, let alone from a Marxist labour process position'³, even though the following description of postwar changes in the commercial and industrial professions would seem to be no less relevant for a majority of academics employed in British Universities in the 1990s:

~~'Most professionals are now salaried employees; much professional work has become divided and standardized and fitted into the new hierarchical organizations of educated skill and service; intensive and narrow specialization has replaced self-cultivation and wide knowledge; assistants and sub-professionals perform routine, though often intricate, tasks, while successful professional men (sic) become more and more the managerial type'~~ (Wright Mills, 1951 : 227).

In a recent commentary upon the rise of managerialism in higher education, in which 'successful professional men become more and more the managerial type', and seeming perversely to urge its further advance in defence of professionalism, the Association of University Teachers has claimed and argued that

'Universities are self-governing institutions which are fundamentally democratic in nature but...the structures which have traditionally supported democracy are often no longer adequate to the task. What is needed are clearer and faster lines of communication between departmental staff and their heads, faculty heads and the most senior institutional managers along with an explicit recognition that senior academic staff will often have a **managerial** role as well as an **academic leadership** role...More than ever, departments need to elect effective managers to lead and defend them. Electing someone unable or

unwilling to take a stronger management role is not the way to ensure that a department prospers in the face of tight budgets and competition for resources' (Association of University Teachers, 1993 : 13)

Here a direct link is made between 'tight budgets and competition' and a putative shift to managerialism. Managerialism is commended because it is deemed to provide an effective means of leading, and defending the professional interests of, particular groups of academics. At the same time, it is claimed that 'this does not mean...that the input of staff is no longer required, nor that collegiality falls by the wayside' (ibid). Yet, in effect, the rise of managerialism means that the input of staff into decision-making is degraded from collegial participation in decision-making to, at best, a more consultative role in which staff willingly accept and support their heads of department who, in their strengthened managerial role, then managerialize the processes through which resources are won and allocated. For, clearly, 'strong managers' will be more successful in conditions where managerial rather than collegial values dictate how resources are allocated. Of course, heads have always had formal responsibility for their departments and have, in principle, been able to overrule their colleagues. However, the acceptance and support of the argument that 'senior staff will have a **managerial** role (in order to cope with pressures to squeeze more out of the system - that is, academic staff - in the absence of additional resources) effectively invites and endorses a shift to managerialism which has been an expedient response to the intensification of external pressures that are discussed later in this paper.

Attempts by academics to interpret these developments have been impeded by the domination of Weberian analysis in studies of professions in general, and of University dons in particular. In Weberian analysis, the focal point of study is the process of establishing and maintaining social closure around an occupation - for example, by controlling the market for its services. From this perspective, erosions of autonomy, pay, status and terms of employment are interpreted in terms of a declining **market situation**, theorised as an outcome of the abstract, modernist logic of rationalization (e.g. Halsey, 1992). When applied to the world of higher education, this approach is undoubtedly useful for appreciating how occupational groups, such as academics, struggle to secure a degree of self-regulation over their work in the face of pressures to replace the traditional ethic of collegiality with that of managerialism. But it marginalizes the embeddedness of these market relations within the dominant (e.g. advanced capitalist) mode of production.

In contrast to this Weberian approach, labour process analysis links changes in the structure and control of work with the dynamic development of class relationships in organizations and society. As Johnson (1980 : 345) has noted, taking the Weberian conceptualization of skill to illustrate his argument, the methodological collectivism of this (Marxian) point of departure, the social relations of production,

`eliminates the possibility of conceiving of the market as an arena of individualized `capacities' or `skills'. Skill is not a given individual capacity which endows a subject with power in an exchange relationship...Skill is a product of social power; it is an aspect of the way in which work is organized which structures the market, creating monopolies and scarcities...In Weberian theory exchange is a relationship of equality which functions to create inequalities only because individuals bring differential capacities to the relationship, while Marxian theory attempts to explain why exchange is unequal' (emphasis added).

Here, Johnson is making two key points. First, that the skills possessed by sellers of labour, such as academics, are not sensibly theorized as individual capacities that provide their sellers with leverage in the labour market but, rather, as that have been demanded and supported by the way that work is organized in society. It is this organization of work that is productive of, and supports the attribution of value, to certain skills. And, therefore, when studying the transformation and/or devaluation of skills, it is necessary to analyse the content, organization and evaluation of work in relation to politico-economic forces that shape such developments. Second, and relatedly, whereas Weberian analysis accounts for inequality in terms of the capacity of individuals to acquire skills and mobilise collectively to create monopolies and scarcities, the Marxian perspective understands the development of the exchange relationship within capitalist societies to be a medium of class domination in the sense that those who do derive an income from capital are obliged to commodify their labour as they compete with other sellers of labour in order to secure the means of subsistence.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to address the objection that, whilst labour process analysis may have some relevance for studying the private sector where there is a direct relationship with a capitalist employer, it has little or no relevance for

studying those employed in the public sector. Although superficially credible, the problem with this objection is that, in focusing upon the immediate employment relationship, it disregards the way that the organization and operation of the (capitalist) state is itself conditioned by a process of struggle between the respective demands of capital (to provide stability and support for the accumulation process) and labour (to provide security and protection from the excesses of capitalist development). To be sure, public sector organizations are not directly governed or disciplined by competitive pressure to generate a surplus, appropriated by their owners, from selling its services in the market place. Demands for its services, and allocation of resources to secure their delivery, are not directly market-driven but, rather, are mediated by formally democratic processes which, in practice, are shaped, constrained and subverted by the privileging of some interests - organized labour, professional groups but, above all, fractions of capital, and the marginalizing of other groups, such as the unemployed and the elderly. It is therefore inappropriate to identify the state, or the organization and content of public sector work, simplistically as an instrument of a single class. But, equally, it is implausible to disregard the interdependent relationship between the modern state and continued processes of capital accumulation in which the dependency of fractions of capital upon the state is evident in calls for state interventions in the fields of industrial and employment policy, and the dependency of the state is most dramatically demonstrated in recurrent fiscal crises. As Offe and Ronge (1984 : 120), it is because of this institutionalized relationship of (inter)dependency that 'state actors', notably politicians and senior civil servants, 'must be interested - for the sake of their own power - in guaranteeing and safeguarding a "healthy" accumulation process'. For although formal control of the institutions of state depends upon gaining electoral support, the resourcing of these institutions depends upon the 'health' of the accumulation process as well, of course, as the capacity of politicians to secure legitimacy for (selective) reductions in public expenditure.

Universities do not float free of the tensions between accumulation and legitimation that beset the development and operation capitalist states. From one perspective, which tends to be given most weight by politicians as well as academics, Universities are represented as institutions as providers of 'social goods', in the form of 'higher' education for a growing percentage of the population who are capable of benefiting from it. When portrayed in this light, Universities legitimise the existence of the state by demonstrating how it makes available goods that, otherwise, would be available

only to a small minority of the population with substantial private incomes. However, this way of seeing Universities is also a way of not seeing as it diverts attention from their role in 'safeguarding a "healthy" accumulation process' (ibid). To repeat, this role is not, in the main, discharged through direct participation in the sale of academic labour for purposes of capital accumulation : it is only when academics act in a personal capacity - for example, by publishing books, taking out personal patents or acting as consultants - that their skills contribute directly to processes of accumulation. Rather, as argued above, the contribution to accumulation is institutionalized in the public funding of Universities. Again, this does not mean that particular activities are directly tied to specific efforts to increase accumulation in particular industries. Nor, relatedly, does it mean that all academic work is intended to make a contribution of this kind since their role in legitimating the state extends beyond this provision to the provision of (an elite of) citizens with the opportunity to study subjects that have little or no apparent relevance for this task. As Offe and Ronge (ibid : 123) persuasively observe,

'it would be a mistake to argue that state policies of education and training are designed to provide the necessary labour power for certain industries...Such policies are instead designed to provide a maximum of exchange opportunities for both labour and capital, so that individuals of both classes can enter into capitalist relations of production'

However, whilst accepting the general thrust of this argument, it is necessary to underscore the extent to which policies on education and training are enacted through the medium of role of cultural traditions and are subject to the influence of interest groups, such as the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) that advice and lobby governments. As a consequence, it is not simply that the state lacks the relevant information about 'the type, timing and volume of skills required by capitalists' but also that the dependence of the state upon privileged interests groups provides the latter with some leverage for advancing interests that are not reducible to the maximization of exchange opportunities. But, when taking this into account, it is also relevant to recognise that the scope for manoeuvre by such groups can be significantly reduced when, confronted by an accumulation and/or fiscal crisis, state actors are determined to align academic labour processes of academics more closely to the goal and disciplines of capital accumulation - a shift that is the subject of the latter sections of this paper.

From a labour process perspective, then, it is necessary to connect the content, organization and control of work, which includes salaried 'professional' work, to the dynamics of capitalist development, including the establishment and reform of public sector institutions, such as Universities. Many faults can be identified in Braverman's analysis of monopoly capitalism (Knights and Willmott, 1990), but he was surely on the right lines when arguing that

~~'almost all of the population has been transformed into employees of capital.~~
Almost every working association with the modern corporation or with its imitative offshoots in governmental or so-called non-profit organizations, is given the form of the purchase and sale of labor power' (Braverman, 1974 : 404, original emphasis)

In the light of the foregoing discussion, this thesis need not be interpreted as a crude Marxist argument in which all institutions are considered to be functionally organized either to serve capital or to realise the predetermined interests of a capitalist class. Nor need it be interpreted simply as making the obvious, but nonetheless vital point, that most work in modern capitalist societies is mediated by the cash nexus. Instead, it can be understood to be saying that the organization and control of work, including the work of academics, is conditioned but not determined by capitalist priorities and disciplines. This argument should not be construed to mean that all actions by politicians and civil servants to facilitate capital accumulation by politicians or mandarins are necessarily 'functional' or successful. Rather, attention is being drawn to a tendency - the transformation of almost all the population into employees of capital - that arises out of the dependence of the state upon revenues derived from the private sector. As Offe and Ronge (1984 : 123) comment, when relating the capitalist state's research and development policies, to the maximising of exchange opportunities, these policies

'are by no means directed towards concrete beneficiaries, such as industries which can use the resulting technologies. Rather these policies are designed to open up new markets and to shield the domestic economy against the intrusion of foreign competitors; in short, to create and universalise the commodity form of value, in whose absence values become non-existent in a capitalist society' (both emphasises added)