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What is the Threat Faced by the Social Sciences?

Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline current higher education policies and practices on public universities, the audit culture and impact in Britain. These have the potential to drive British universities and the social sciences into the ground and risk destroying the very quality that is their hallmark. Feelings of threat felt by social scientists are high. The high stakes involved in this debate, however, have raised its temperature, preventing us from seeing that the contemporary landscape for social science is very uneven. Policy-related economics in particular is thriving under the impact agenda and large parts of politics – such as security studies and the study of terrorism – prosper under current events. Health studies, sports social science, psychological well-being research, human rights law, medical sociology and educational and birth cohort studies are just a few of the social science fields responding well to current challenges. Public law, international law and environmental law are also flourishing.

It is also necessary to point out that the social sciences are not under direct attack as they were in the 1980s. Social science is affected by the assault on public universities and the onward march of marketization in higher education, but, it is reasonable to claim, no more or less than other subject areas, although there is a largely unsubstantiated feeling among some social scientists that the income they generate is used in their university's internal funding procedures to support science and medicine departments with large deficits (a point made in Commission on the Social Sciences 2003: 108). However, the growth of the audit culture is not directly aimed

at social science. There appears equal misery across intellectual arenas, not disproportionate harm for social science.¹

Indeed, the difficulties Britain has in attracting high-quality university staff because of low salaries and the oppressiveness of the audit culture are more acute in the natural sciences, where the inability to attract high-quality scientists from overseas is matched by the loss of top British scientists to better funded science facilities abroad. Among the social sciences, only economics is badly affected by this process. As we saw in the last chapter, on some measures of regulation and public accountability in the audit culture, the social sciences have been able to demonstrate how very good they are. And general impact – what I call value-for-society – seems especially suited for social science. Social science has, thus, had resounding praise from the Minister for Science and the Universities. David Willetts not only placed social science as central to the future issues facing humankind, he specifically mentions its world class quality (see **Vignette 3**).

The view that social science is *not* under threat, however, warrants close interrogation. Looked at closely, Willetts's endorsement is less ringing than it sounds, for it casts social science's usefulness in a particular utilitarian way. Of course, the tendency to cast the usefulness of social science in utilitarian terms for its contribution to dealing with government policy questions is a fault of all governments. It was also David Blunkett's view, for example, when he was Secretary of State for Education. Speaking at the Annual Conference of the ESRC in 2000, he said: 'social science should be at the heart of policy making. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what type of policy initiatives is likely to be the most effective. And we need better ways of ensuring that those who need such information can get it quickly and easily' (quoted in *Commission on the Social Sciences* 2003: 70). However, such utilitarianism, while distorting government perceptions of social science throughout time, though worrisome, is not particularly threatening. The threat, in fact, lies elsewhere than in social science.

¹ STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and medicine) and languages have not lost all their block grant – money from the public exchequer to fund student places – and while humanities and social sciences have from the 2012–13 academic year, STEM subjects feel greater pressure under the audit culture because of the threat which technical meanings of impact have for basic and curiosity-driven science. This highlights the unevenness of the current landscape.

Vignette 3 David Willetts on social science

Speech at the ESRC Festival of Social Science and the launch of the ESRC video *Celebrating Social Science*, November 2011, carried on his web blog at <http://blogs.bis.gov.uk/blog/2011/11/08/celebrating-the-value-and-relevance-of-the-social-sciences/>, 8 November 2011.

‘Last Thursday I had the honour of speaking at the ESRC’s flagship event celebrating the social sciences, held at the British Academy. This forms part of the ESRC’s Festival of Social Science, now in its ninth year. The festival is a real celebration of the breadth of social science research, with well over 100 events around the country including major cities like London, Belfast, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Manchester. Social science is a global science, with enormous impact on how we live our lives worldwide. And the UK is a world player – ESRC’s international benchmarking exercises have judged the UK to be second only to the US in anthropology, economics, political sciences, psychology and sociology. Social science shapes public policy and services, informs welfare reform and enhances civil liberties. This was effectively demonstrated at last Thursday’s event with the launch of ESRC’s ‘Celebrating the Social Sciences’ publication supported by an informative short film. It shows how beneficial our expertise in this area is to policymakers and the public alike. Some examples include: The ESRC-funded Centre for Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy at the Institute for Fiscal Studies explained the shock to the public finances caused by the recession, informing Government officials, politicians on all sides and the media. A review carried out by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods/Lancaster-Warwick-Stirling node led to a new policy report and a major revision of the scientific evidence underpinning DNA database policy. Data from the Millennium Cohort Study were used extensively by the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, commissioned by the Government in 2010. The University of Bristol’s review report emphasized that the first five years of a child’s development life has the strongest impact on their life chances, strengthening the Government focus on ‘Foundation Years’ services. The £33.5 million investment announced earlier this year in a new Birth Cohort Facility project will take this important work even further. It will support the biggest longitudinal study ever undertaken in the UK – involving 90,000 children – as well as providing computing capacity to ensure we can analyze data from all the previous cohort studies. This will give us a broader and clearer picture than ever before of social mobility over the past 65 years. The studies are

a shining example of the UK's support for the social sciences, and our expertise in interpreting research data. However looking ahead, the social science community also faces a series of challenges: The 'fruits' of social science: We need to get better at showing the relevance of our quality research – the ESRC's evidence briefings are an excellent example of this, such as the one on supermarket productivity and planning. Data-mining: We must look for ways to use more data from existing research – the Birth Cohort Facility will provide a great opportunity for this. Transparency: I very much welcome ESRC's continued commitment to work with Research Councils and others to meet the issues around open access facing the wider research community. Evidence-based policy: I want to see us build on social science's already excellent record of informing and shaping Government policy. We should recognize and celebrate the social sciences and the enormous contribution the UK makes to a global body of knowledge. The social sciences vastly improve our understanding of the world around us – our society, our economy, our quality of life and public health – and most importantly they help us improve the outcomes of people from all backgrounds and areas of society. Everything I heard at the Festival of Social Science suggested to me that even in the difficult financial climate we face today, the social sciences are thriving here in the UK.'

As we shall see in this chapter, what differentiates the contemporary period is the drive to marketization and regulation that shapes government relations with HEIs and the threat this poses to the Haldane Principle that protected academic freedom and autonomy in university research.² Publicly funded research agendas are under pressure to reflect government policy initiatives – not so much evidence-based policy, as John Holmwood (2011a: 4) puts it, but policy-based evidence. The audit culture impugns ancient practices of academic freedom and research autonomy that helped make British universities distinctive and world class. While this is a universal assault on higher education worldwide (Brown 2010; Burawoy 2011; Christensen and Eyring 2011), its British form, given the special history and quality of public higher education in Britain, makes this moment also one of threat to the very idea of the public university in the United Kingdom. Another feature of the current

² There is debate about whether the Haldane Principle ever existed in higher education and, if so, what it really meant. Holmwood (2011c) strongly endorses it, while Edgerton (2009) describes it as an invented tradition. I follow Holmwood.

conjuncture, therefore, is that the principle of public university education has been fatally breached. Decades of hard-won rights and entitlements to public university education have been struck from British history with such vulgar haste that plans for what replaces it are so poorly formed that higher education policies appear to change almost on the hoof. Marketization portends the introduction of private-for-profit-providers to compete for the 'delivery' of higher education, receiving taxpayers' cash (in the form of up-front fee income from the government) without any obligation to provide public benefit.

Again, however, there is need for a caveat to this mood of threat. While public universities are being damaged in Britain beyond repair, it is primarily their status as *public institutions* that is grievously wounded; it is inevitable that they will be threatened as *places of learning* from all these changes, but it is not clear yet in what way or how badly. Social institutions are all capable of adjusting to gradual change. British universities have adapted to rapid change before – notably the building of the Robbins universities in the 1960s and the ending of the binary divide in the 1990s – and prospered as places of learning. It is not my purpose in this chapter, therefore, to speculate on the future of the universities as places of learning and whether or not they are capable anymore of serving their original purpose (this is considered by Christensen and Eyring 2011; Collini 2012; Docherty 2011).

Moreover, I am convinced that whatever threats they are under as public institutions can be turned also into opportunities. I suggest that this moment of degradation for British universities as public institutions simultaneously gives social science a chance to renew its vision for the twenty-first century and to restate its public value. I conclude this chapter by arguing that the new university requires a new form of public social science. The rest of the book will be devoted to elaborating this proposition.

I intend in the following sections to proceed in a jigsaw manner, building up a picture of the current conjuncture piece by piece. I begin with impact before moving on to marketization.

What is the impact of impact?

The vehement criticism social science directs against impact can easily be misconstrued to suggest it is seeking a licence to be unaccountable or worse

still that it delights in being irrelevant. Onora O'Neill (2011: vii) spoke for every academic when supporting the case for the public value of the humanities by saying nobody does research except in the hope that it will at some point make a difference, although they are unlikely to think of this simply as a matter of economic benefit. I once wrote that impact is a sheep in wolf's clothing (Brewer 2011a, 2011b). This was a deeply unpopular view among my peers but it is one by which I stand. I mean by it that impact looks more hazardous than it really is, for HEFCE in particular has backtracked to adopt a very friendly form of it which does not require every person to demonstrate impact. I argued, nonetheless, that this sheep in wolf's clothing could well come to be ravaged by the ferocious farm dog (2011b: 256). This is what has happened. The real bite of impact comes from its placement as one part of the more dangerous problem of marketization.

I have argued elsewhere (Brewer 2011b) that impact is a terrain which people traverse from at least three diverse routes. First is the policy evaluation tradition, in which impact is unproblematic. The second is the philosophy and sociology of knowledge, where the social production of knowledge leads to matters around the impact of research, among other things. Mostly, however, people come to impact from the direction of the audit culture in higher education, where it is rejected as part of the audit culture itself. The suggestion that impact is a sheep in wolf's clothing is widely accepted within the policy evaluation tradition, which is bemused by all the fuss, while to critics of the audit culture such a metaphor naïvely underplays the dangers surrounding it.

The first and most basic problem is that there is no consensus over what impact means. Is it the outcomes of research (and are these its outputs?); is it 'user' engagement and dissemination, the benefits of the research, spin-off companies and technology transfers, or changes in behaviour and policy? All these have been suggested at one time or another and they have different connotations and meanings. Of course, paymasters have utilized their position to force impact in its narrow sense upon universities, and inasmuch as paymasters call the tune, one would expect technical meanings to dominate. Impact has been made part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) on government insistence, endorsed by HEFCE, the chief organizer of the REF, and incorporated as part of the criteria for the award of research monies from the research funding councils, endorsed in the case of social science by both

the ESRC and the AHRC, which funds some social science research.³ Their definitions of impact thus merit exploration.

Research Councils United Kingdom (RCUK), the umbrella body for all the research councils, defines research impact as ‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’.⁴ The ESRC’s website goes on to say:

research impact embraces all the diverse ways that research-related skills benefit individuals, organisations and nations. These include: fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom; increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy; enhancing quality of life, health and creative output. A key aspect of this definition of research impact is that impact must be demonstrable. It is not enough just to focus on activities and outputs that promote research impact, such as staging a conference or publishing a report. You must be able to provide evidence of research impact, for example, that it has been taken up and used by policy makers, and practitioners, has led to improvements in services or business.

This economic and policy focus is reinforced by the domains in which impact can be experienced. The ESRC’s website continues thus:

This can involve academic impact, economic and societal impact or both: Academic impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, method, theory and application. Economic and societal impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations.

‘The impact of social science research can be categorised’, it argues, into three types: ‘instrumental: influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behavior; conceptual: contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates; capacity building: through technical and personal skill development’. In order to compete for public

³ Research funded by the European Union (EU), a significant source, is required to show impact for Europe and the EU but this is not the same understanding of impact as in RCUK. As I point out below, the European Research Council rejects the impact agenda.

⁴ Taken from the ESRC website at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-toolkit/what-how-and-why/what-is-research-impact.aspx>, consulted on 11 November 2011.

research monies, therefore, applicants are required to specify their 'pathway to impact'. That is: 'identify your key stakeholders, for example, other researchers; public sector; business/industry; identify how they will benefit from your research – types of impact might include: improving social welfare/public services; influencing public policy; contributing to operational/organisational change; identify how you will ensure they have the opportunity to benefit, for example through organising public events; conferences; interaction with the media.'

The definition pursued in the REF is different in crucial respects. HEFCE's website says the following about impact:⁵

For the purposes of the REF, impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia. Impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to: the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals, in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally. Impact includes the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects. For the purposes of the impact element of the REF: impacts on research or the advancement of academic knowledge within the higher education sector (whether in the UK or internationally) are excluded. Impacts on students, teaching or other activities within the submitting HEI are excluded.

This is a suitably broad notion of impact, although it notably excludes impact within academia; it is public impact outside their own domain that is treated as the main measure of academics' impact. Nor is there the same lionization of economic and policy impacts as with the research councils. The case study approach utilized by HEFCE in the REF means that not every person returned will need to demonstrate impact. This more liberal approach is in part because HEFCE had a more thorough consultation exercise with the academic community in setting its policies than did the research councils and was more influenced by the voices raised against impact: and rightly so.⁶ After all, the

⁵ See *Assessment Framework and Guidance of Submissions*, Ref 02.2011, July 2011, at HEFCE's website http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/pubs/2011/02_11/, consulted on 11 November 2011.

⁶ Smith et al. (2011) undertook content analysis of the responses in the second consultation and noted people's primary objection was the threat to autonomy implied by the impact agenda.

REF affects everyone, while applications to the research councils have such a low hit rate that applying is now a minority activity leaving most unaffected by RCUK policy (applications will be further constrained by demand policies designed by the research councils to discourage perpetual failures from further attempts). In 2010–11, the ESRC had the lowest hit rate of all research councils at 16 per cent, having dropped further from the year before (although there is no evidence this drop is related to impact assessment). This explains the seemingly unfair paradox that most people's ire is directed towards HEFCE's imposition of impact while the most pernicious policies on impact are pursued by the research councils.

The difference between these definitions of impact is worth reinforcing. Research councils have a very narrow notion of impact. The ESRC, for example, restricts it to value-for-money in the economy and society as measured by its benefits for economic performance, competitiveness, policy debates and services, the AHRC to 'economic and social benefits' (see <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/fundedresearch/pages/impactassessment.aspx>). RCUK accepts, however, that these impacts can be felt by other academics inside the academy. The REF operates with a broader understanding of the definition of impact, where it is value-for-society, which perforce restricts its display to the public arena outside the academy. In other words, the definitions of impact alive within the audit culture set up an unfortunate choice. Value-for-society, in all other respects a good thing, cuts academics off from domains in which they feel more comfortable – impact on peers, students and to intellectual culture. The impact debate, therefore, makes public value problematic for its effects in minimizing the contribution to knowledge. Knowledge itself is not rendered valuable in its own right, only for what it serves either to value-for-money or value-for-society. Impact, therefore, creates an unfortunate antinomy with public value. While some definitions of impact are, thus, open and inclusive, even these are problematic by setting up resistance to the language of public value. Impact, in short, is counterproductive for debate about public value in higher education. This is a point to which I return in the next chapter when suggesting we need to shift language code away from impact towards public value.

Besides clarifying its meaning, we also need to ask impact from whose perspective? Impact can be approached from the viewpoint of stakeholders, funders, the investigators, the respondents, government policy objectives

and on *ad infinitum*. ‘Users’ are in one sense everyone and thus in another sense no one; they need specification to be meaningful. ‘Benefit’ is a value judgement and varies according to normative evaluations from a particular standpoint, whereas ‘outcomes’ are measurable if understood, for example, in terms of outputs like publications. ‘Outputs’, however, are often the weakest meaning of impact. What matters, paradoxically, is that broad definitions of impact are permissible in order to be inclusive, while narrower meanings should be clarified in specific instances where they are appropriate. Inclusivity of meaning not exclusivity is essential.

The areas in which impact can be displayed are equally broad and diverse, such as policy formation and practice, civil society, the economy, knowledge transfer, heritage and the cultural industry, mass media and so on. Some of these domains are more highly valued than others by those driving the impact agenda, and more relevant to some kinds of social science research than others. Some can be local, others national and transnational. Whatever impact means, however, it is important to accept that it can be displayed in as broad a space as possible, so that no domain is privileged above another. This is crucial in order to avoid the accusation that utilitarian notions of impact are its only prized forms, and that the economy or policy domains the only spaces that matter.

The indicators of impact differ with its meaning and domains. Metrics, such as in the form of citations of published work, objectify the indicators of impact and are favoured in areas of social science which are article-based rather than book-led – since books are often neglected in citation indexes – and where citations of each other’s work in small subfields is commonplace. But metrics are no more or less important than local and national press coverage. ‘User’ engagement and dissemination, policy change, behaviour change and contributions to the local economy are no more significant than, say, contributions to public debate, civil society discourse and NGO and voluntary group thinking. Impact is indexed as much by the take-up of research by other researchers, by teachers, by lay members of the civil sphere and what we might call an ‘educated citizenry’. If this makes impact difficult to measure, it is because this complexity is the very nature of the process of impact. It is very important to the sheep-like character of impact that its evaluation is not restricted only to that which can be measured easily. To recycle the phrase with which I have become associated (see Donovan 2011: 176), counting the countable because

the countable can be easily counted renders impact illegitimate (first used in Brewer 2011b: 256).

This last point emphasizes that the problems with impact extend well beyond definitional matters. It is not 'owned' by the academy but seen as imposed from outside, thereby challenging ideas of academic autonomy. The fact that it is possible to easily show impact in its general sense does nothing to endear the impact agenda to social scientists who feel no ownership of it. The *language* of impact is a novel imposition even if the *practice* of impact (under different names like 'engagement', 'participation' and 'action research') is routine for social scientists. And impact in its technical sense risks valorizing certain sorts of research where impact is easier to demonstrate, thereby distorting the meaning of impact to things most obvious (like policy, knowledge transfer, contributions to economic enterprise and spin-off companies), shaping the nature of research activity into areas where impact is easier to claim and defend. This has the effect, as Holmwood (2011c: 14–5) noted, of reproducing policy-oriented, technocratic knowledge by large interdisciplinary teams much beloved by politicians, policy makers and civil servants.⁷ The contribution of this sort of research is the very benefit David Willetts refers to in his praise of social science, quoted in Vignette 3.

The worst offenders in this respect are the research councils, where applicants are required to speculate on possible impacts sometime in the distant future for a variety of potential users who may find the research beneficial in potential ways. It is not just that this is a new requirement and faces the resistance every fresh procedure provokes, it is meaningless. These impacts may be anticipated now but they can never be predicted; they are even uncertain at the time. The connection between an input (research money) and an output (research findings) is opaque enough to make the assertion that there has been a specific impact (no matter how measured) pretty unreliable, but this is even more untrustworthy when projected forward rather than

⁷ This is commonly called Mode 2 Knowledge and is associated particularly with analyses from science studies by Nowonty and colleagues (see Nowonty et al. 2001). Mode 2 Knowledge contrasts with Mode 1, created within disciplinary boundaries often under the lone researcher model, which is more conceptual, theoretical and oriented to the disciplinary core. This contrast is much favoured by the sociologist John Holmwood (for example, Holmwood 2011c) and featured greatly in the ESRC benchmarking review of sociology led by Nowonty, which Holmwood co-organized (for details of the Report see the ESRC website at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Int_benchmarking_sociology_tcm8-4556.pdf). As President of the European Research Council Nowonty, speaking in March 2012 at the fifth anniversary meeting of the Council's foundation, has said it will not countenance the adoption of an impact agenda.

assessed retrospectively. Impact varies over time and can change, positively or negatively, at the one-point snapshot whenever it is measured. Impact is, thus, conditional, even serendipitous.

We also have the problems of negative and disguised impact which distort this causal chain. Negative impact can be described as research which is rejected, not because it is wrong but for its counter-intuitiveness or its opposition to current policy, government objectives and the like. Social science research is more likely to be sensitive and the politics of social science research increases the prospect of negative impact. Disguised impact arises when research impacts are hidden and unrecognized. This may in part be a failure of researchers to declare or be aware of it, but mostly it is the consequence of policy makers, the press, civil society and the rest being ignorant of it. Benefits have to be recognized as such if research is to have impact, but this does not mean that disguised impact is non-beneficial; its benefits have not yet been valued. The black hole that exists between research and its take up increases the prospect of disguised impact. None of these concerns have yet been resolved.

The heckles of practitioners which are raised at the language of impact used by the research councils, increases many fold when coupled with the research councils' deployment of government research priorities to shape their own research agendas. The furore vented on the AHRC in early 2011 when it was thought that its delivery plan was too close to the Conservative Party's idea of the Big Society makes this point. This blurring of lines augurs the infringement of academic freedom, impinges on academics' autonomy and introduces the prospect of government interference in the independence of research activity. That the research councils should have national priorities for research paid for out of the public exchequer is reasonable, but to frame these priorities using the language of party politics exposes the research councils to criticism on grounds that they are toadying to the paymaster. The ESRC was more astute than the AHRC in the language employed in its delivery plan. Its current 'strategic research priorities' are economic performance and sustainable growth, influencing behaviour and informing interventions, and a vibrant and fair society. These are general enough and encompass large swathes of the social sciences. But they are outworked in particular funding initiatives that can be more narrowly conceived. The 'Big Society' is an ideological project and it is hard to defend the autonomy of the research councils when notions very much like it, such as 'connected communities', become research initiatives within

them.⁸ As King (2011: 76) reminds us, there has always been publicly funded policy-related social research supported by the ESRC, but the current phase in research council funding, he argues, is distinguished by the adoption of narrower utilitarian notions of research linked to broad research themes that are in tandem with government priorities. This suggests that the long-established Haldane Principle – which, with respect to the universities, means governments should leave individual decisions about fundable projects to academics – while not compromised, since clearly ministers and civil servants do not sit on the committees that award them, risks appearing so (see Holmwood 2011c).

The bigger problem with impact, however, is still measurement. If academics have to live with the impact agenda because they have no choice, we at least ought to be able to measure it. It seems that it is the problem of measurement which has driven policy. Measurement concerns forced HEFCE to apply a wide definition of impact in order to catch as many indices of it as possible; and measurement problems made the research councils take the prospective view of speculating on long-distant impacts in order to avoid having to measure it at all. Measurement problems are not insurmountable. In particular, small subfields where citations of each other's work is common incestuous practice, like the policy evaluation tradition or social studies of science, or larger social science fields that work in an article rather than a book culture, value metrics immensely as a measurement tool, while others to whom it is relevant, favour patents, spin-off companies and other technology transfers or policy impacts. The adoption in the policy evaluation tradition of measurement techniques from health economics, like the Payback Framework, is feasible elsewhere in social science (see Donovan 2011: 176).⁹ This explains why economics and

⁸ It is worth noting that the 'connected communities' initiative was launched by the New Labour Government and predates David Cameron's discovery of the 'Big Society', although this does not excuse the AHRC in seeking to link the two. For further details, see RCUK *Annual Delivery Plan Report 2008–09*, page 4, accessible at <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/publications/anndeliveryplanrep2008-09.pdf>.

⁹ The Payback Framework is briefly summarized by Donovan and Hanney (2011). It is descriptive rather than analytic, involving breaking the research process into phases, assessing its 'payback' on the way and ending up evaluating its 'health and economic benefits'. It works in health economics because there are clearer indicators of what these benefits are. Its applicability to other areas of social science, currently being championed by its founders at the Health Economics Research Group at Brunel University, is the question which the Donovan (2011) special issue of *Research Evaluation* was partly designed to test. It came to no strong conclusion. The payback framework was used by RAND Europe when, in collaboration with the AHRC and the University of Cambridge, it prepared a report *Assessing the Impact of Arts and Humanities Research at the University of Cambridge* (<http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical-report/2010/RAND-TR816.pdf>), evidence for which was accumulated from peer review interviews, self-reports and interviews with external informants.

the policy-oriented social sciences, familiar with research evaluation methods, have less hostile views on measurement. But even the strongest advocates of the Payback Framework in health economics point to recurring problems around the time lag between input and impact and of attributing ownership to it (Donovan 2011: 178).

SIAMPI (Social Impact Assessment Methods) is another measurement method. It focuses on ‘productive relations between researchers and stakeholders’, and has been deployed to evaluate some ESRC-funded research (see Molas-Gallart and Tang 2011). But it utilizes a definition of impact far more general than the technical meaning and still has untold concerns in attributing the causal chain of impact. The SIAMPI approach for example, defines impact as ‘socially valuable outcomes’ (Donovan 2011: 177), and restricts its assessment only to the perspective of stakeholders. ‘Productive relations’ is also circular in its effects, for unproductive relations presumably rule out impact or restrict it to negative impact. While it is not impossible to employ assessment regimes like this, Martin (2011: 251) makes the astute point that rolling them out to the REF would be so labour intensive and require such expertise that the costs of measuring impact would outweigh the benefits of doing so.

It remains a conundrum, therefore, why something as opaque, diffuse and immeasurable as impact (in its technical sense) should have such prominence in the audit culture. The answer, of course, is its centrality to the imposition of business-led models in social research as part of the marketization of public universities. A value-for-money approach to impact is part and parcel of the market. It is to this element of the current conjuncture that I now turn.

The march of the market

Marketization is captured neatly in four ‘C’s’ – choice, cost, competition and commodification. To understand the link between this powerful alliteration it is necessary to appreciate that marketization is simultaneously both means and end. It is the *means* to effect choice – to compel public bodies to respond to people’s demands – but it is simultaneously the *goal*, the preferred way to

drive down the costs of the state in meeting them. Markets are presented as mechanisms to respond to people's desire for greater choice, but they involve artificially creating competition as the way to meet them cost effectively. The rhetoric of choice cleverly disguises the introduction of competition. The consequence of competition is commodification: the rendering of all things into objects, products bought and sold on markets, making them subject to the operation of supply and demand. It is one thing to reduce the manufacture of cream crackers to the four 'C's, quite another university education, health care and other public services.¹⁰

The form of marketization we have in Britain, however, is not based on free market principles, like the opening up of competition, the introduction of deregulation policies, the need to set prices to determine the cost of things and the protection of the rights of consumers. In the context of Britain's neoliberalism, marketization means something significantly different.

Neoliberalism emerged in the 1980s as a radical restatement of classical liberalism and is marked by its strange combination of libertarianism and conservatism, and free market ideology and state regulation. This is a very heady mix. On the one hand it involves rejection of 'Big Government' and a strong central state while advocating state regulation, including regulation of the free market. It advocates the rights of individuals against society and the state while invoking conservative notions about civic engagement, local communities and active citizenship. Neoliberalism, thus, is not simply the free market and the strong state, to use the title of Gamble's analysis of Thatcherite neoliberalism (Gamble 1988), nor is it just about introducing a certain set of economic principles. At one and the same time, neoliberalism is an economic project to promote market capitalism, a political project to roll back the state, a policy project to increase government regulation and a civil project to promote free individuals whose 'self help' mentality turns from self-interestedness into civic engagement (which in Britain is called the 'Big Society' but which means in practice the exact opposite, the 'little society' of small communities

¹⁰ Evidence from the British Social Attitude survey (see Curtice and Heath 2009), for example, indicates that the rhetoric of choice is favourably received by the public, who favour consultation and the exercise of their own decision-making in services like education, health and social care, but this declines dramatically when linked to competition and the introduction of private providers. The ethos of public provision is popular and undercuts support for choice. Competition and commodification are unpopular partners in the alliteration.

and tight-knit neighbourhoods of independent people aware of their civic responsibilities).¹¹

The Thatcher governments in Britain in the 1980s that first introduced neoliberalism used to refer to their policies as a return to 'Victorian values' (on which see Samuel 1992). This was done in part to reduce the sense of radical discontinuity with the past that neoliberalism provoked to the way Britain had conducted politics, social life and economic policy during the twentieth century. But it was invoked also to suggest theirs was a moral crusade rather than a utilitarian one; that neoliberalism was about the return to virtue and was not crudely economic. 'Victorian values' ennobled a political and economic ideology by turning it cultural. Nothing could be more guaranteed to provoke social scientists.

Social scientists were among the chief analysts of neoliberalism (for critique from within cultural geography see Harvey 2005; economics see Dumenil and Levy 2010; law see Bell 2011; linguistics see Chomsky 1999; race theory see Goldberg 2008; sociology see Crouch 2011). Two factors explain this. First, social science became a chief target of criticism from neoliberalism, for not being a 'science' and for its objectification of society above the individual: who can forget the suggestion of Britain's first neoliberal prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, that there is no such thing as society only individuals and families?¹² This attack led to a stream of social science analysis in response. Secondly, neoliberalism competed with social science for some of the same intellectual ground, and its widely different take on these shared issues – family and marriage, crime, education and educational attainment, the decline of communities, unemployment, women's rights, trade union rights, macroeconomic policy,

¹¹ In a philosophical outline of the 'Big Society' by the Conservative MP Jesse Norman (2010), former member of the pro-Conservative Party Policy Exchange think tank, an eclectic set of ideas are drawn on from classic liberalism and the philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, among others. In Adam Smith, for example, self-interest is portrayed as necessarily virtuous and encourages social co-operation, while for Bernard Mandeville 'private vices' become 'public benefits' through their encouragement to economic progress. In this classic liberal view, philanthropy and civil society are not incompatible with self-interest. For Oakeshott civil society is based on ties like friendship, affection and sentiment which are often distorted by social institutions. For these ties to flourish, therefore, civil society requires minimal regulation and interference from the state. The Big Society is against 'Big Government', portrayed as Labour state centralism, as well as rampant economic liberalism.

¹² Strictly speaking, Thatcher did not actually say there is no such thing as society, although what she did say meant much the same thing. Her actual words were as follows: '[W]ho is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first'. This comment appeared in an interview with the magazine *Women's Own* and can be accessed at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

policing, public order, health provision, social care and the like – promoted vigorous social science engagement with it. This fierce rebuttal only intensified the irritation neoliberal governments felt towards the social sciences.

During the period of the inception of neoliberalism in Britain, therefore, before the Conservative election victory in 1979, social science was in people's sights, and shots were fired (although not all of them by neoliberals). The Social Science Research Council was forced to change its name, right-of-centre think tanks were established purposely to provide the 'proper' sort of social science information and analysis (such as the Institute for Economic Affairs and its off-shoot the Social Affairs Unit, and the Institute for the Study of Conflict), and a select few social scientists wrote highly publicized reports complaining of the takeover of British social science by a variation of lefties and lunatics – the report by the sociologist Julius Gould, *The Attack on Higher Education*, being the best example (for a sociologist reflecting back on this report see Platt 2003: 118–22). The 'Black Papers', so named to contrast with government white papers, attacked progressive education theories and the social science evidence on which they were based.¹³ And, as King (2011: 82) notes, there was a general scepticism about social science among government ministers, especially Sir Keith Joseph, for a time minister for education (and it is worth recalling that Mrs Thatcher had been education minister in Heath's Conservative cabinet in the early 1970s). While the university cuts introduced in the 1980s did not single social science out – and the 1982 Rothschild Report recommended the continuance of a research council for the social sciences (on which see King 2011: 83) – it was nonetheless a cold climate for social science.

Thirty years on and marketization proceeds apace.¹⁴ But if social science was once its special target, this is no longer the case. It is universities as public

¹³ It is important to reiterate that some of these developments predate the 1979 election victory of Mrs Thatcher but assisted in shaping the climate in which social science could later to be attacked. The Institute of Economic Affairs, for example, was founded in 1957, Gould's report dates from 1977, the Black Papers between 1969 and 1977 and the Institute for the Study of Conflict from 1970 (it folded in 1989). Some of the latter's leading figures had connections with the CIA and British and German intelligence services. The fact that it was leading social scientists orchestrating these (and later) attacks – Julius Gould, Leonard Shapiro, Digby Anderson, David Martin, David Marsland, Edward Shils, Caroline Cox, Charles Cox – reinforced the suspicions of the Conservative government about the social sciences. Caroline Cox was given a life peerage under the Thatcher government (Platt 2003: 123 n14).

¹⁴ This volume does not purport to provide a history of higher education policy in the years following the demise of Mrs Thatcher, and it serves the narrative if we leap over the intervening years to connect Mrs Thatcher's policies and those of the Coalition government. Where relevant in the text I distinguish between, or point to continuities with, the higher education policies of the Blair and Cameron governments.

institutions as a whole which bear this burden now. The application of market principles to universities has provoked a torrent. This has two causes. It reflects in part the relative protection of universities in the past from the vagaries of open market competition (making them almost nationalized, the last institution in public ownership, save the National Health Service, which now too is not immune to marketization). There is also extreme doubt among academics that market principles can be reasonably applied to education and that university degrees can be purchased like cream crackers off the supermarket shelf.

A brief digression is necessary at this point. Cuts in university budgets are not the same thing as marketization. The number of university degree courses across the sector is being cut (down by 12 per cent in 2012 alone according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service),¹⁵ and staffing levels are being reduced in some subjects and some universities (mostly on an *ad hoc* basis since this is more through voluntary severance schemes than redundancy). However, the concern people properly have with ‘cuts’ misplaces their attention, for the word does not adequately describe the current problem. Higher education has taken its share of across-the-board reductions in public expenditure, but as Steve Smith, the former Chair of Universities UK (UUK), argues, higher education cuts were not as bad as UUK feared and government funding of higher education continues (2011: 133). He writes: ‘The government expects to be spending around £6.5 billion in tuition loans, £3.5 billion in maintenance loans and £2 billion in maintenance grants and scholarships on top of the remaining teaching grant in 2014–15. The balance in funding between teaching grant and loans is currently about two-thirds to one-third. By 2014–15, the balance is expected to be around 80/20 loans to teaching grant’ (Smith 2011: 135). Smith estimated that with an average annual fee income of £7,500 per student, the sector will be getting an *extra*

¹⁵ A report by the University and College Union (UCA 2012: 3), entitled *Choice Cuts: How Choice has Declined in Higher Education*, published in February 2012, estimated that provision of full-time undergraduate degree courses fell by 27 per cent between 2006 and 2012, but this varied by region and subject matter. England witnessed the largest fall at 31 per cent, Scotland the least at 3 per cent. In subject matter, the report recorded only the patterns for single subject degrees, which in practice is as much an index of the growth of joint degrees as decline in overall provision. There was an overall reduction of 14 per cent in the number of single subject degree courses in the same period. That for social science was the smallest loss at 12.8 per cent, compared with 14.6 per cent for STEM subjects and 14 per cent for arts and humanities (UCA 2012: 5). Courses in human geography and sociology in England were the hardest hit social science single subject degrees, the former likely to be the result of overall decline in provision, the latter simply the growth of joint honours courses with sociology as a partner.

£10 million by 2014–15. This was ‘good news’ he said (2011: 136). ‘Good news’ is worth spreading and he further estimated (2011: 137) that subject bands C and D, covering the humanities and social sciences, which from 2012–13 are no longer to receive public money from the government, will have an *increase* of 16 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively, on 2010–11 figures once student fee income replaces block grant (this assumes fees at £9,000 but takes into account monies required to be set aside for bursaries and the like). He makes his point well: this is not the commonly held view. But he also misses the point. Marketization is different from cuts.

The marketization in higher education means two things: the introduction of an artificial market within higher education so that it is run *as if* a free market; and the opening up of higher education to outside market forces to stimulate competition. We might call the one the introduction of an internal market, the other exposure to the external market. The two dimensions are closely related but they manifest themselves in different policies. They combine to cause the commodification of university education and with it the complete degradation of the public university. This involves a loss of public *function* for the universities rather than a loss of money.

The creation of an internal market within higher education is done in order to achieve market differentiation. In true markets, differentiation permits supply and demand to be allocated by market forces and for the true value of the goods to be assessed in order to permit judgements about their value-for-money, both to consumers, now and in the future, and for providers of the goods, in order to assess the efficiency and quality of their provision. This requires that the goods be priced so that suppliers can gauge the costs in producing them and consumers what it costs to acquire them. The marketization of universities, therefore, requires differentiation *within* individual universities, as units compete for resources and have their value-for-money assessed by their university managers in terms of efficiency in their use of resources and the quality of the product. It also requires differentiation *between* universities in the sector as a whole, as they compete with one another in the value of their respective goods and the efficiency and quality of their provision. Competition over price between universities is critical to the operation of a true market. This permits consumers (students, parents, careers teachers and, in this case, employers of students) to make informed judgements about the value to be

gained from the goods on offer (which to students are, narrowly, the degrees and certificates earned and more broadly the 'educational experience', and to employers the value of the person with this product) from the various suppliers (the universities).

Market differentiation, therefore, requires dismantling a common – undifferentiated – university sector to introduce differential pricing. This gives the 'educational experience' and the degrees awarded different values in order to trigger supply and demand mechanisms that discriminate between the universities on price. Previous university funding formulae simply did not do this. The block grant for teaching was differentiated only by the costs of the provision across broad subject bands, not between the universities, so all universities received the same money per student within the relevant subject band. The varied academic reputation of universities introduced some differentiation within the sector but there was no market for the high-reputation universities to exploit this in terms of differential prices to their students. The introduction of top-up tuition fees by the Labour government in 1998 did not – nor was it intended – to introduce market differentiation. This has changed.

Distinguishing between Labour and Coalition government policies on marketization is necessary at this point. There were two stages to New Labour's policies. In the first stage, it introduced up-front fees, which were set at a standard level. It then replaced them with variable fees which were supposed to be repaid postgraduation. All institutions charged roughly the same fee, avoiding price competition. While Charles Clarke, the then Labour Education Secretary who introduced top-up fees, supported private investment in universities, he was careful not to privatize the function of universities. The Coalition government, however, has introduced market differentiation by price. The Coalition government's total abolition of the teaching block grant for humanities and social science subjects (bands C and D) with effect from 2012–13 and its replacement by variable fees (up to £9,000 per year) introduces market differentiation. Higher education remains free at the point of entry but the state-guaranteed loan system will require repayment above an income threshold recouped through income tax.¹⁶ The high-reputation universities

¹⁶ The income threshold is £21,000. Currently, it is £15,000. It is interesting to compare the cost of education to students in the United Kingdom with other European countries. In terms of the Euro, Britain's £9,000, translates as €10,360, while Germany it is €1,000, France €169, Spain between €9 and €16, Holland €1,627, Italy €850, Slovenia €30 and Denmark zero (quoted in the *Times Higher Education* 2 June 2011).

have favoured this policy because it allows them to charge a higher price for their 'product' in terms of higher fees – which means that they have colluded in the downfall of the public university system they helped to create – and the government has intervened in the market to dissuade universities from forming a cartel by charging the same fee. The so-called 'core and margin' policy has effected market differentiation when at one point it looked like most universities were opting for the £9,000 maximum. Universities were opened up to competition from cheaper providers in the Further Education Colleges and by November 2011, 20,000 student places were created especially for cut-price providers (half of which have been bid for by Further Education Colleges).¹⁷ Economic incentives were also quickly devised to persuade universities to charge less than the maximum (by permitting them to bid for larger numbers of students), and giving elite ones unrestricted access to the best qualified 'A' level students with AAB grades. It has been mooted that this will apply to ABB students from 2013–14, which would mean that roughly one third of student places would fall outside the cap on numbers, increasing the competition between universities for the remaining numbers with the intention to encourage some to lower fees in order to improve their chances. Government interference in the market through its manipulation of a university's ability to bid for student numbers has, thus, created differentiation when variable fees looked as if they might not.

The abolition of the block grant is not about transferring the expense from the public exchequer to the consumer as a cost-cutting device in response to financial constraints, for as we have seen, the burden on the public purse is not eased: academic critics are right when they point out it has actually *increased* costs in the short to medium term. David Willetts (2012: 31) has admitted that higher fees more than compensate for the loss of the block grant. Variable fees are not about reducing government costs but achieving the marketization of higher education – the differentiation of the universities in terms of price, value and costs, so that the learning experience becomes a commodity subject to supply and demand rather than state planning. In short, fees are about neo-liberal ideology.

For market differentiation to work effectively, therefore, universities have to be exposed to performance indicators (such things as teaching quality

¹⁷ In February 2012 the government announced that 9,547 of these places had been allocated to FE Colleges, distributed around 143 colleges out of the 167 who applied.

assessments, student satisfaction surveys, research assessment exercises, impact measurement polices, league tables, world rankings, Queen's Anniversary Prizes and the *Times Higher Education Awards*, which includes 'University of the Year') and be made subject to policies of selectivity and concentration (in terms of regulating access to research council funding, and receipt of quality research funding – known as QR – and postgraduate studentships).¹⁸ This gives 'customers' the information to make judgements of the value they get from the different prices charged by the various universities. Quality judgements about universities such as these allocate the value attributed to the 'goods' they supply compared to the price they charge. Value-for-money calculations can, thus, be made, by consumers, suppliers and the government. In all these ways, the government readily offers the universities what education managers eagerly aspire to appropriate – market and product differentiation.

Product differentiation affects the 'goods' universities 'sell' as much as themselves as 'suppliers'. Business speak involves managers identifying the special 'learning attributes' of their degrees – the University of Aberdeen has defined the 'attributes of the Aberdeen graduate' (see <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/graduateattributes>) – the distinguishing features of their degree structure, their 'innovative courses' and what value-added the particular degree and the university's 'unique' 'learning experience' affords. Universities, thus, emphasize, among other things, their new libraries and the 24-hour library provision, the scale of their IT provision, new sports facilities, luxury accommodation and the attractiveness of the nightlife in the city. The so-called Melbourne Model of 'new generation courses', or as the University of Aberdeen calls them 'sixth-century courses', achieve product differentiation in order to strike a market niche by focusing on 'breadth' not narrow specialism. Product differentiation was once effected solely by quality; it is now sold to us on the market by business-led models of management.

The business-led models of management universities employ within their institution merely reinforce the value-for-money approach to higher education

¹⁸ Postgraduate studentships awarded by the ESRC are concentrated in a few recognized Doctoral Training Centres. The Scottish government has announced that it will only provide funding for its studentships at the Scottish Doctoral Training Centre. The Russell Group Universities are expected to be the main beneficiaries of this concentration. This is a radical departure from the situation that pertained at the 2008 RAE when the then Labour government said it would fund QR in whatever pockets of excellence it was found. Concentration policies run against the tendency for research activity to be cross-institutional, even cross-national. Competition at the institutional level for resources permits partnerships only in limited circumstances.

that marketization seeks to enshrine in the sector as a whole. Business-led models of management show themselves in a number of ways. Education managers busy themselves with defining the role attributes of each staff grade, the aims and objectives of our courses and the performance measures by which staff are evaluated for their contribution to value and price. Education managers willingly impose market differentiation within every university structure as its 'units' are evaluated by their quality contributions, assessed in terms of their efficiency and costs, and rendered into value-for-money resource-allocation calculations that can now be closed down or cut for financial unsustainability. Academic criteria are made to seem secondary to financial ones: and so some universities close their bookshops – no longer viable under competition from Amazon – to be replaced in one case by a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet¹⁹ and others their postgraduate courses 'unless they address skills gaps in the economy'.²⁰

Another manifestation of business-led university management is the deployment of the language of business to strike home their market differentiation. They seek 'market and product differentiation' by means of USPs ('unique selling points'), corporate branding, 'brand promises', 'strap lines',²¹ mission statements, 'market attuned portfolios', 'value propositions' and logos as much as by scholarship – according to one management consultant who specializes in university corporate branding the purpose is to make universities 'sizzle tangibly' (see **Vignette 4**). Ben Page, chief executive of Ipsos Mori, the polling body, when speaking at a conference on educational services in February 2012, recommended universities adopt the branding strategies of supermarkets (in showing they are listening to students, like customers purchasing cream crackers off the shelves).²² Jim Northover, from

¹⁹ After the sudden closure of the bookshop in Sheffield Hallam University, a poll among students found that humanities and social science students supported the idea of universities having bookshops to assist people's studies, while science, technology and business studies students did not. It is not surprising that those who study within disciplines that work in book cultures should value bookshops; what is regretful is that their needs are secondary to financial concerns.

²⁰ The latter is a reference to London Metropolitan University, whose 2011 interim report on the review of postgraduate education and research, argued that in order to 'avoid further loss of market share', all postgraduate courses must in future have 'demonstrable demand from students, employers and other stakeholders, address skills gaps in the economy [and] demonstrate good employment and earnings outcomes' (quoted in *The Times Higher Education*, 15 December 2011, p. 11).

²¹ Among the 'strap lines' devised by UK universities are 'celebrating 50 years of excellence', 'the achievement of excellence', 'we are exceptional', 'elite without being elitist', 'shaped by the past, creating the future', 'knowledge, innovation and enterprise', 'valuing excellence, sustaining investment', 'distinguish yourself', 'leading the way', 'go beyond original', 'a place of useful learning' and 'a place for possibilities'.

²² Quoted in *Times Higher Education*, 8 March 2012, p. 12.

Vignette 4 Corporate branding in the university sector

BrandED Consultant Group, Denver Colorado (<http://www.brandEDus.net>), whose own 'strap line' is 'Branding from the Inside Out', specializes in assisting universities with their corporate branding needs. In a paper accessible on the web by Rex Whisman, Principal and Chief Strategist, entitled 'Internal Branding: A University's Most Valuable Intangible Asset' (http://www.brandchannel.com/images/papers/460_Internal_Branding_final.pdf) the company makes the case for universities to appropriate this market device. The paper begins thus:

'Universities today find themselves competing for students and support in a marketplace made increasingly complex by a convergence of factors. First, their target audience is bombarded by an assortment of marketing messages and consumer information—beginning with the ranking systems that identify the “best” schools and the “top” programs. The audience is also more brand-savvy than its counterparts from previous generations. In fact, students today openly affiliate with various consumer brands, whether Apple, Nokia, Urban Outfitters or Virgin. Any institution seeking to distinguish itself with this group needs to keep in mind that it is sensitive to authenticity and sophisticated about evaluating marketing messages. Making matters even more complex, demographic shifts are changing the marketplace in many regions of the world. In various European countries, for example, the population is aging, and even in the United States, where the children of baby boomers have been applying to colleges in record numbers, the pool of applicants is expected to begin shrinking this year. All this is happening just as many governments across the globe are reducing the resources devoted to higher education. In other words, the competition among universities is getting stiffer and stiffer. As a result, colleges and universities have learned that they must become more accountable to their constituents. They realize that, just like for-profit entities within the corporate world, they must develop sustainability strategies. Many have turned to branding as a solution. In fact, in the last years of the 20th century, branding became part of the higher education lexicon, and today, most colleges and universities around the world have embraced a brand strategy—logo redesigns, catchy taglines and trendy advertising campaigns—with high visibility and some tangible sizzle.'

the branding consultancy group Lloyd Northover, used the publication of the 2012 *Times Higher Education* World Reputation Rankings to self-servingly push for branding in the HE sector 'to separate the wheat from the chaff' (Northover 2012: 26).

The clamour from branding specialists to 'assist universities in product differentiation' is linked to marketization, for, as Northover writes, 'in a market context branding could make all the difference' (2012: 26). Temple (2011), in a recent summary of branding in universities, gave a less sanguine assessment, arguing that reputation was measured by academic excellence rather than branding work. He had no good word for branding consultants, whom he felt wasted universities' time and money. Market differentiation, however, persuades education managers of the opposite: figures released to the *Times Higher Education* under a freedom of information request showed Lancaster University spent £135,000 on 'brand management' in 2010–11 and Bath Spa £80,256.²³

The pressure to ensure quality performance across the various indicators has allowed education managers to turn universities into prisons of surveillance, with bursars their jailers. To distinguish this new kind of university, Ginsberg (2011) refers to what he calls the 'administrative university', where administrators turn universities into businesses, and where education managers are suspicious of academics for their resistance, do their utmost to dismantle academic autonomy and run universities to enhance their own pay, prestige and numbers. Those who resist become outmoded 'old style academics'. In my view, this identifies the wrong target. Administrators have grown in number but have become dominant only because they implement marketization rather than breeding ruthlessly for their own aggrandizement. Administrators are merely the warders, the prison system that affords them the authority is marketization.²⁴

²³ Reported on 5 January 2012, p. 13. The clever sleight of hand in all this comes from the argument of education managers that universities' position in leagues tables is linked to branding and that league tables form rather than reflect reputation.

²⁴ Figures released by HESA for 2009–10 show that the total number of staff employed in universities fell by 2 per cent over the two previous years, with secretarial staff hardest hit with a 14 per cent drop. Academic staff fell by 1 per cent. In contrast, student welfare and human resources staff grew by 14 per cent and public relations and marketing staff by 5 per cent (*Times Higher Education*, 26 January 2012, p. 13). The longer the time period used in the comparison, the worse the effects. Comparisons between 2004–04 and 2009–10 show that the number of 'managers' rose by 40 per cent compared to 19.2 per cent for academic staff, with one manager for every nine academics compared to one in 11 in 2003–04 (*Times Higher Education*, 8 March 2012, p. 12).

The multilayered nature of performance accountability in modern universities results in a complex number of prison guards, with staff obliged to attend 'training' in writing 'pathways to impact' statements, submit to the regular round of research and teaching reviews, as well as to 'developmental-led' appraisal and end-of-year research development reviews, complete the endless paperwork reporting on their activities, and now inform managers of their whereabouts all year round, if not also to be on campus during specific hours of the day. Work allocation models count the countable in order that staff can be counted for their contribution, forgetting that some things worthy of recognition are just not able to be counted (and which thus go unrecognized).

The adoption of business-led nomenclature in universities has been profound. Registrars are now Chief Operating Officers and senior academics get 'knowledge transfer' and 'internationalization' added to their titles of office. Staff are required to 'push the envelope' and 'think outside the box', be 'outward facing', do 'blue skies thinking' and be 'game changing'. I have yet to hear a senior education manager refer to students as 'customers' or 'consumers' but the business leaders and industrialists nominated to university courts and senates frequently do. A study of the language of university mission statements by Sauntson and Morrish (2010) revealed that they employ a vocabulary of about 25 nouns, modified by 12 different adjectives, in which 'excellence', 'quality', 'impact', 'top', 'leading edge' and 'internationally significant' dominated, although they did note a rare mention of 'academic freedom' and 'intellectual'. But no one seems to defend anymore the idea propounded by Lord Robbins in his 1963 report on higher education that 'reflective enquiry' – 'thinking time' – is crucial to university life.

This language switching, however, is only symptomatic of a much wider cultural shift. Along with marketization has come the decline in manners in universities. I mean by this more than the outbreak of whinging that has emerged as levels of dissatisfaction rise; I suspect academics have always been a crabby crowd. My point is about a change in the discursive practices that mark university culture. The Royal Irish Academy calls its humanities and social science section 'polite literature and letters', which is reminiscent of an academic culture not only in which a subject matter was categorized quaintly but also when it once conducted its business in a particular discursive style.

Now that academic values have given way to those of the market, and business is their business, civility in universities has disappeared with them. Marketization has changed the symbols and culture of universities in many ways: and an ethnographic study of university culture still calls to be written (although Watson 2011 comes near). A minor novelist from the Forest of Dean, John Moore (1907–67), in his little known *The Waters Under the Earth*, published in 1965, that evokes village life in the area, used the decline of the red squirrel as a metaphor of the rapid industrialization of farming that dramatically changed the English countryside after World War II. The disappearance of the senior common room serves a similar purpose in modern universities.

No such room now exists, except in a few universities as a relic, let alone the culture of ‘polite’ discourse it symbolized. Even those staff for whom the fountain pen is still the only piece of technology needed to pursue their research now eat lunch at their desk, working behind closed doors, disillusioned at spending some of the time filling in the latest census demand from university managers. Technology has partly driven the loss of civil culture in university; so, too unionization, as the job has moved from a craft-like vocation to a trade in the minds of many practitioners – and with it the failure now of both academics-turned-managers and staff to see each other as peers. But marketization has been the main source of value change; manners have given way to the tyranny of the market.²⁵

The introduction of an internal market by which universities can differentiate themselves to make supply and demand work is, however, only one part of marketization. Its second feature is exposing universities to the external market. This comes in two forms: private investment in universities and the emergence of for-profit universities. The former shows itself in universities having to become entrepreneurial in order to compete with other public bodies and charitable causes for money from sponsors, public companies and private benefactors, selling the rights to name chairs, research institutes, buildings, libraries and sometime soon perhaps even the name of the university itself

²⁵ There is fear among many academics that the commodification of university education will also lower standards (see Furedi 2012). Wherever customers are king and student evaluations become centrally important, spoon feeding, dumbing down and grade inflation can readily follow unless guarded against. Seymour Martin Lipset once referred to elections as the democratic translation of the class war. In similar fashion, the debate about declining standards is a proxy for anxiety over the negative effects of commodification in education.

in order that benefactors part with money as a supplement to meagre public resources.²⁶ It is notable always that entrepreneurial Vice Chancellors seek their legacy in new buildings rather than research capacity, libraries rather than people, because they seem more permanent. New buildings – appropriately named after the benefactor rather than an academic – do matter, but so do the researchers and teachers who occupy them.

Permit me a digression about Halifax Town Football Club. It has a wonderfully impressive football stadium indicative of former glory days – the era when they beat Manchester United, the then European Champions two goals to one – but the ability of the players declined and they not only went out of the Football League, they dropped out of the Conference League as well. They went bankrupt and were relegated to three divisions below. And now they play away to teams who change in sheds and use tin baths for post-match washes. There is no point in having excellent buildings if what the people do in them is not first class as well. Treating academics as if what they do is manufacture cream crackers is no way to nurture excellence. The moral of the story is that it is academics in the universities, not the business-led marketeers who manage the universities, who create excellence. Education managers, of course, naturally dispute such a view. Professor Rick Ryland of RCUK, writing in the *Independent* on 19 January 2012, in a pull-out section aimed at postgraduates, thought ‘behind every breakthrough lies first-class infrastructure’. Call me naïve, but first-class minds have something to do with it as well.

Exposure to market competition from other providers, however, is perhaps the most dangerous element of the external market. This shows itself in two ways. First, some UK universities have set themselves up as alternative providers on the open market by establishing satellite campuses overseas with local partners in order to benefit from the market in international students.²⁷ In return, some private but not-for-profit universities from overseas have

²⁶ Some Oxbridge Colleges have changed their names to honour benefactors, such as Robinson College Cambridge and Kellogg and Green Colleges at Oxford, and the old Liverpool Polytechnic was rebranded as Liverpool John Moores University, although this was not as a result of sponsorship.

²⁷ Among them are Nottingham (in Malaysia and China), Middlesex (Dubai and Mauritius) and Newcastle (Malaysia). The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education has published reports on trends in overseas campuses since 2002. The most recent report found that there were 162 international branch campuses in September 2009, a 43 per cent increase in 3 years. Of these, 78 were American, 14 Australian, 13 British, 11 French and 11 Indian. There were also 14 closures of international branches in recent years. See *Times Higher Education* 3 February 2011 at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=415018>.

campuses in the United Kingdom appealing to UK students. Amity Private University from India, for example, has six 'international' campuses, one a Business School in London. US universities have been working in the United Kingdom for a while now but catering to US students wanting years abroad. In 2011, there were 118 affiliates to the Association of American Study Abroad programmes in the United Kingdom. US for-profit providers work in the United Kingdom too, such as the American Institute for Foreign Studies but catering to US students studying in the United Kingdom.

The second, more pernicious, development is that for-profit providers have been allowed to set up in the United Kingdom to compete with British universities for local students; and more are trying to do so. The post-1992 sector of universities is particularly vulnerable to competition from private providers. The centre-right think-tank Policy Exchange, which describes itself as an independent, non-partisan education charity but is heavily endorsed by the Conservative Party (whose leading figures it quotes on its website, with their photographs smiling) wrote a report in 2010 making the case for private funders *Higher Education in an Age of Austerity: The Role of Private Providers* (<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/publications/publication.cgi?id=212>). There are some fanciful fears raised by this (for example, that there will be a privately funded 'University of the Big Society'). However, McGettigan (2011) is otherwise quite right to draw attention to the way the market for higher education is being distorted by the government trying to drive the price down through its manipulation of the supply side of the market. The Student Loans Company (SLC) has been granted permission to fund student loans at for-profit providers,²⁸ including at institutions that do not yet have degree-awarding powers. This must be seen in conjunction with proposals from the

²⁸ The *Times Higher Education* on 22 December 2011 reported a parliamentary answer given by David Willetts that indicated 5,900 students had received loans to attend 'alternative providers', which is up 40 per cent from the year before. In June 2012, it was disclosed that the number for 2011–12 had increased to 9,366. BPP borrowed £2 million from the SLC in fee and maintenance loans in 2010–11 and David Willetts announced that students will be allowed to borrow up to £6,000 a year in taxpayer subsidized loans from 2012–13, up from £3,375 in 2011–12 (*Times Higher Education*, 1 March, 2012, p. 9). Students at seven private institutions received more than £1 million in loans from the SLC in 2010–11, even though only five have degree awarding powers. Not all of these are for-profit providers though. Morgan (2012: 39) cites HESA figures which reveal that there were 37,738 students at 65 private providers in 2009–10, the bulk taking business, management and law. Initially only 11 of these private institutions were subject to QAA institutional review. Private providers could, therefore, get degree-awarding powers and attract students with taxpayer subsidized loans, while being exempt from the fair-access policies established and evading the regulatory system public HEIs are constrained by (Morgan 2012: 41). However, the furore over this revelation persuaded the government to subject them to the same regulation and to impose caps on student numbers.

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills to reduce the number of full time equivalent students it takes to legally constitute a university from 4,000 to 1,000, only 750 of whom need be studying for a degree, which potentially opens up competition from many smaller for-profit institutions and companies.

At the moment, there is only one for-profit company with degree awarding powers, BBP, which was given the title 'University College' by David Willetts almost immediately on him assuming office, and it restricts itself to business and law, although Montague Private Equity acquired the College of Law in 2012 for £200 million, which is another of the private providers that have degree awarding powers but is, as yet, not-for-profit (see Thornton 2011 for a study of the impact of privatization from the perspective of the teaching of law). These are primarily teaching institutions that are research-inactive, which contradicts the idea of a university.²⁹ It is known, however, that the government has been in discussion with other companies that have an interest in following BBP, and in January 2012, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, which runs universities, put out a tender for research on supplying it with a 'comprehensive picture of HE provision by private and alternative funders'. It is suspected that the government is worried about the US example, where for-profit providers have a disproportionate number of low income students and a high default rate.

The Apollo Group which owns BPP is a US corporation which also runs the University of Phoenix, the largest for-profit institution in the United States. The *Times Higher Education* reported on 2 June 2011 that its annual accounts in the year up to March 2011 showed it had downgraded the value of BPP by \$170.4 million as a result of lower than expected student numbers. For-profit HEIs are more common in the United States, with over three million students, about 10 per cent of the country's university population, most of whom are low-income, non-traditional students who cannot afford the fees of non-profit private or public universities and colleges (cited in Marcus 2011: 40–3). While the British government has been in discussion

²⁹ There is some concern over whether the poor quality research outputs of the major US for-profit institutions qualifies them to the title 'university'. Research by Quentin Hanley, reported in *The Times Higher Education* on 16 February 2012, on the citations in Thomson Reuters's *Web of Knowledge* to research papers produced by staff at the leading for-profit providers there found few examples of well-cited work. Phoenix University mustered fewer than 200 papers with a total citation of 700 since 1993, Kaplan University had 100 papers with just over 500 citations, and Argosy University fared a little better with 200 papers that produced over 1,000 citations. Hanley is quoted as saying that they are 'essentially research inactive institutions' that should not be called universities (p. 7).

with companies like Kaplan Higher Education Group and Apollo with a view to lowering price in the United Kingdom, it is ironic that in the United States these for-profit providers are trying to resist state and federal regulation of their practices. Marcus (2011: 40) reports that 11 states in the United States are investigating the business practices of for-profit institutions, including for misrepresentation of programmes and false promises of outcomes. Kaplan is currently denying allegations that it falsified records to disguise a high drop-out rate. The level of state regulation in the UK university sector may well stem the rush of US for-profit providers moving here (and after public revelation at the absence of QAA oversight, by June 2012 the government was pressured into subjecting private providers to state regulation).

There is something very important to note about these marketization policies: neither the internal nor external market is a true market. For one thing this is not perfect competition since the 'price' is not set by the market itself but by the government. Universities have been told the upper parameters of the fees they can levy; and the government is interfering in the market to lower prices. HEIs intending to charge fees above £6,000 require permission (of the Office of Fair Access, a state-funded body). In some cases, devolved governments in the United Kingdom have created even more imperfect competition by telling universities who it is that they *cannot* charge for the goods. In Scotland, for example, Scottish domicile students pay no fee, and those in Wales and Northern Ireland subsidized fees. Both the price and the buyers are rigged, therefore, set not by supply and demand but by an outside regulator of market conditions. Depending on where they live, UK students will purchase the 'good' for either quite a lot of money or nothing: meaning that there are several markets in higher education not one. Price, in other words, is not a market decision.

Demand is fixed too. The artificiality of the market is emphasized by the fact that demand is regulated by the government. It regulates the number of overseas students allowed to enter the United Kingdom (and has tightened up on access through imposing stricter visa regulation), it manipulates the 'local' market by offering 20,000 cut-price places, some in the further education sector, to stimulate demand at the bottom end to drive down price, and it lifts the cap on student numbers at the top for those with 'A' level grades at AAB or better, fining HEIs if they over-recruit non-AAB students. In 2011–12, 40 universities in England were fined a total of £21 million for over-recruiting

in the academic year, representing a total of only 5,750 students, up from £8 million for 14 universities the year before. One was docked £3.4 million in 2009–10 for over-recruiting 913 students (*Times Higher Education*, 7 April 2011).³⁰ As the *Times Higher* editorial penned that particular week, it is a funny old market in which the state prevents popular institutions from recruiting. The situation grew worse in 2011–12 because universities feared a reduction in applicants from 2012–13 with the introduction of fees and over-recruited to compensate. London Metropolitan alone was fined £5.9 million for over-recruitment in 2011–12. It should be noted that private providers were once excluded from the cap and could recruit taxpayer-backed students unlimited on courses agreed in advance by the government, but this market advantage was withdrawn in 2012.

Value is also not made transparent by the market, contradicting one of the principal features of free markets, which requires that the value of the good be immediately apparent to the purchaser to enable a rational transaction to take place. The benefits accrued through a degree and the wider ‘learning experience’ that led to it, reveal themselves only over time and decisions about purchasing which goods from which seller on entering university are based on imperfect knowledge. Writing in defence of his government’s proposals in the *Times Higher Education* on 26 May 2011, David Willetts saw them as enabling students as prospective buyers to ask before entering the market ‘What am I paying for?’ They do not know this, nor can they. To assist ‘consumers’ in obtaining the necessary information to permit ‘informed’ market decisions, universities will be obliged to provide Key Information Sets (see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm>) from 2012–13, which include student satisfaction data; course information; employment and salary data; accommodation costs; financial information, such as fees; and students’ union information. HEFCE on its website offers universities a template for presenting this data. Whether this is the information students need to make judgements of value is beside the point; the value is impossible to calculate at the time the information is supplied, for the value of the good is not transparent.³¹

³⁰ This policy particularly affects those universities who recruit through clearing because this makes it harder to plan student numbers, although at least one elite Russell Group university was fined in 2011–12.

³¹ What compounds the difficulty in calculating the value is that some of this information is also notoriously difficult to gather and verify in any reliable way, notably student destination surveys, average salaries and graduate-level employment.

All this makes the market in higher education very artificial. Economics tells us that perfectly 'true' markets are rare, for there is always some legal regulation. Mostly, however, this framework of laws is imposed in order to make the competition *fairer*, by eliminating monopoly competition, illegal markets, cartels and the like. The marketization of higher education ends up with *unfair* competition because it is fixed. The absurdity of competition in higher education is no better demonstrated than by the complaints of the Universities Minister, David Willetts, and Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills which runs universities, about the 'anti-competitive behaviour' of universities in trying to squeeze further education colleges out of the degree awarding 'business' by means of revising their validation arrangements with them, when rigged competition is the very principle on which the whole market in higher education is based. What matters to the Coalition government, of course, is that it is they not the universities who do the rigging. Their creation of a margin of 20,000 places to be auctioned to institutions charging less than £7,500 tuition fees, and inviting further education colleges to bid for them, is rigging the market. In August 2011, Newcastle College and New College Durham were the first further education colleges to be granted foundation degree-awarding powers and in February 2012 the government announced that just under half of these biddable places went to 143 of the 167 Further Education Colleges who applied. Newcastle College, for example, won more of these places (260) than did neighbouring Northumbria University (235).

It is clearly absurd to introduce competitive pricing and then criticize universities for acting competitively – nothing could illustrate better than this complaint how artificial the market is in higher education. James Winter, Head of the Council of Validating Universities, which oversees the arrangements universities develop to validate the degree courses in further education colleges, commented in response to allegations of anti-competitive behaviour that universities were 'being told off for behaving like it's a free market' (*Times Higher Education*, 16 February 2012, p. 17), when the coalition government knows full well it is nothing like a free market – they are rigging it in every way conceivable.

Government manipulation of the market illustrates something else very significant about current marketization policies: marketization involves the withdrawal of public funding through the block grant but not the ending of

state regulation. At first sight, regulation seems entirely counterproductive to the purposes of introducing a market. In true markets where there are a lot of suppliers selling essentially the same product, competition is strong and price varies downwards. This is what the government says it wants to achieve in higher education (and, incidentally, in national health). But where the market is tightly regulated by the state, competition ends up being low, since market differentiation is diminished by legislation and regulation. In these cases, competition becomes an illusion, existing as a rhetorical assertion not a real market practice. In economic terms, the higher education market constitutes a monopsony (one powerful consumer that is able to control demand, like a supermarket chain with a local farmer) – the opposite of a monopoly (where there is one supplier) – with the government acting as the single powerful consumer able to manipulate demand. Therefore, for all their business-speak to strike a market niche, what is on offer by British universities is still very much the same.

British higher education remains one of the most highly regulated university systems (Burawoy 2011). In Europe, French and Greek universities are more highly centralized, where academics are civil servants, but traditionally UK universities had autonomy: and they still do in areas like the appointment of staff (including Vice Chancellors and governing boards), and the setting of curriculum, course materials and professorial salaries (and with the move to local bargaining, perhaps also for all staff). The old block grant played a major role in guaranteeing institutional autonomy, since little monitoring came with it. But the marketization of higher education is eroding this autonomy. Indeed, the highly artificial form of marketization we have in Britain *requires* regulation.³² It is not that the commodification of higher education, turning it into the supply and demand of ‘goods’, is a different mode of marketization from the regulatory system of university education in highly planned societies. Marketization demands both commodification and regulation. It is the state that

³² Simon Baker (2011: 33) referred to the red tape that once existed in British universities as no more than a sticking plaster, but warned that universities are now facing the situation where almost every aspect of university life will be regulated by funding councils. This arises from the proposal for HEFCE to take over the quality assurance functions of the Quality Assurance Agency, giving it responsibility for teaching quality and protection of student rights and interests, as well as its roles in funding teaching and research, monitoring the finances of universities, from the management of estates to internal auditing of accounts and governance. This would make HEFCE like the watchdogs that regulate competition in the water and energy markets. He raised the prospect that some universities may prefer to go private to evade this level of regulation.

regulates the market and sets its conditions, determining price and buyers. It is the state that regulates the mechanisms for market differentiation by imposing the performance indicators through which value is distributed variably in the market. It is the state that regulates supply by permitting for-profit suppliers to enter the market, and it is the state that has developed the audit culture that facilitates the performance of market behaviour.³³ Since British universities are increasingly persuaded – required – to buy into the Bologna accord, which standardizes higher education practices across Europe, regulation is now as much at the European as the British state level. Regulations, of course, have not everywhere changed behaviour within universities. Universities might now be businesses but sometimes they are still not always business-like. There are still poor practices in teaching, PhD supervision and research, but this is because the regulations are evaded rather than absent.³⁴

Conclusion

Good social science requires good universities. While it is not credible to claim the social sciences are under attack by the audit culture, at least not any more, or less, than other subject areas, Britain is witnessing the end of centuries-old traditions with the demise of the public university; traditions which made British universities among the best in the world, gave the country renown and respect, contributed to its civic culture and, it has to be said, also its economic and scientific expansion. Governments, as guardians of traditions, are obliged to hold in trust for future generations what is worthwhile about them and to manage the inevitable process of modernization and change that all traditions have to undergo without destroying what had made them worth keeping in the past. Guardians of traditions render themselves open to unusually fierce contempt when they are careless with what traditionalists believe to be good about customary practice and when they are footloose with valued traditions by imposing rapid and poorly planned change for what appears no reasonable

³³ Power (1997), a professor of accounting, shrewdly makes the point that late modern society is an 'audit society' because public accountability and control are necessary features of what is here called 'neoliberal marketization.'

³⁴ Collini (2012: 134–5) argues that regulation increases inefficiency because it focuses people's attention on what is reportable within the audit system rather than on what needs to be done.

sense at all. As Stefan Collini (2012: 198–9) wrote in the Epilogue to his defence of the idea of a university: ‘we are merely custodians for the present generation of a complex intellectual inheritance which we did not create – and which is not ours to destroy’.³⁵

Voices raised in opposition to marketization are many and febrile. Some are worth capturing. The Campaign for the Public University (<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/>) is vociferous; conferences, workshops and public lectures are aplenty defending the principle of university education as a public good. Some musty old learned societies that seemed to be run entirely for the dining benefits of their Fellows have been stirred into life. Learned societies are engaged, so too are trade unions, university staff, students and newspapers, but – and this may sound strange – not many senior university managers are. The connivance of most university leaders in the destruction of the public university in the ambition of stealing market advantage for their own institution is one of the worst features of the destruction of these centuries-old traditions. Craven, commercial, crass: there are so many alliterations to add to our four ‘C’s’.

I am not going to add to this chorus of utter contempt, nor seek to heap more shame. Among this clamour, there is a need for new voices. I will try to show in the next chapter how this moment of degradation for the public university can be turned into one of opportunity to empower the social sciences by re-envisioning their public value for the twenty-first century.

³⁵ The irony in this remark cannot be passed without comment, for this complaint at what is the destruction of the education legacy for future generations is directed against a government minister noted for a book on intergenerational justice (see Willetts 2010).