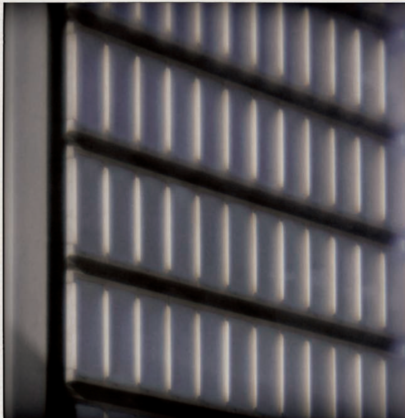
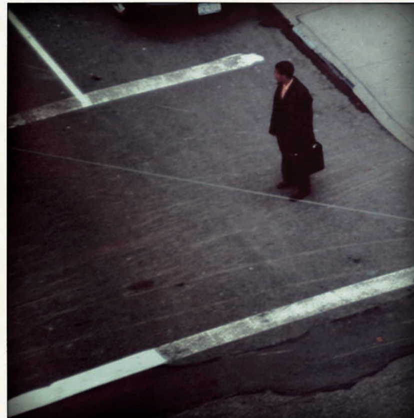
Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere





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Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

The intellectual work of the 2011 ECREA European media and communication doctoral summer school

Ljubljana, 2011

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Social Scientists and the European Neoliberal University: Tensions in Conceptualisations of the Public Role of Universities

Pika Založnik and Jeoffrey Gaspard

1. Introduction

Academic practices and conceptions of the public role and missions of the European University have radically changed in the last decade (e.g. Harland, 2009). On a pan-European scale, state-driven neoliberal discourses have recontextualised and redefined the universities as institutions embedded in a so-called global Knowledge Economy that establishes competitiveness between universities as an explicit goal. This 'marketisation' of the ("corporate"[1], "service" or "entrepreneurial") University is paired with changes in institutional administration (e.g. Moriau, 2001): an increased focus on research evaluation, the heavy use of ICTs, the professionalisation of the researcher, etc.

More specifically, this institutional context imposes new communication strategies, which include the building and fostering of numerous alliances with an increased number of extra-academic "stakeholders" (local industry, future students, potential fundraisers, etc.) (Thys-Clement, 2001). In this context, a resurgence of the 'publicness frame' (in opposition to the dominant economic frame) can be discerned (Splichal, 2011: Ch. 4), stemming particularly from the social sciences.

In this chapter we will discuss the different conceptualisations of publicness, authority and engagement in the public sphere in the context of the university, along with the tensions that arise from it. For social scientists

1 In this chapter, terms between two quotation marks *without italics* refer to neoliberal discourse elements often encountered in policy-making and other prescriptive, official documents.

this results in a balancing act between the different and sometimes opposing imperatives of the University-as-an-institution, their conceptualisation of the public role of the university and the scientist and the scientific culture in the field of the social sciences. Although we can discern the rise of a 'participatory paradigm' in both institutional and scientific discourses, we propose that the imperatives and the strategies of the University could increasingly be at odds with the self-understanding of social scientists and their scientific culture.

2. Marketising the European University

One of the main driving forces of these institutional transformations is the recontextualisation of neoliberal discourses in the university context. For the purpose of our argument, we will define 'neoliberalism' as a radical, centrally-planned, state-driven socio-political agenda that aims to marketise extra-economic activities, i.e. traditional public services such as education or health care (Dardot & Laval, 2009: 152-153). Policy-makers, then, put faith in the market to solve contemporary problems emerging from a supposedly failed welfare state which suffers from the (often self-imposed) chronic shrinkage in public funds.

As far as European universities are concerned, this neoliberal formatting takes shape, in part, with the active establishment of a pan-European market of researchers[2] and of higher education in general (Bruno, 2008), which remains an explicit objective for the European Commission (2007). More particularly, these transnational attempts at coordinating higher education policies are paired with a redefining process according to which the University is restated as a local institution embedded in an inevitable and global 'knowledge economy' (Harding et al., 2007). This political repositioning brings about a state of affairs which legitimises an increased competitiveness between newly found rival universities: competitiveness, then, is seen as a one-size-fits-all rule to achieve so-called better and more efficient public service and research. Besides, such a knowledge economy implies a 'financialisation' of knowledge as a new type of market-valued good, or, at least, as an "asset" with economic potential (Foray, 2004). Although we can agree that academic institutions have always been competitors to some degree (some say for the sake of emulation), the current market agenda has been actively initiated by policy-makers since the

2 The "European Research Area – ERA" constitutes such a common market. Moreover, the professionalisation of the researcher, best exemplified by the "European Charter for Researchers", can be viewed as a first step toward the marketisation of the researcher.

beginning of the 2000s. Furthermore, it does now seem that the neoliberal "*ideological-discursive formations*" (Fairclough, 1995) are already being naturalised, so that administrators and faculty members are not necessarily aware of the ideological load of the multiple discourses at play: it now becomes natural to speak of student "customers" or mass "research patenting".

The changes in practices triggered by (or, to some extent, co-constructed by) this current marketising trend are manifold: a strong focus on research evaluation and accountability, an upsurge in university-industry cooperation, the heavy use of ICTs, the internationalisation agenda, the extreme massification of student enrolments, the imperative of publishing in top-level scientific journals, the professionalisation of the researcher, the fixation on "quality" or "excellence", the implementation of management techniques, etc. On another level, these institutional transformations are also translated into new discursive practices: like other social spheres colonised by the neoliberal ethos, a competitive Higher Education generates new genres and buzzwords (Mautner, 2005) that are mainly imported from the corporate sphere (e.g. Osman, 2008). "Networking", "evaluation", "quality (control)", "benchmarking", "spin-off", "(research) market", "(knowledge) production", etc. are just some of the exogenous terms presently gaining ground on university campuses. Moreover, new concepts embody the current zeitgeist in which administration officials are urged to conceive of their university's relations with its socioeconomic environment: "corporate university", "service university" or "entrepreneurial university" are becoming common reifying concepts - even in scientific literature (e.g. Tjeldvoll, 2002 or Etzkowitz et al., 2000).

3. Out of the Ivory Tower!

In this overall context, universities are asked to secure sufficient financial resources in order to become competitive without weighing on restricted national budgets. This results in a metamorphosis of the traditional Humboldtian missions of research and teaching (and the overarching mission of public service). For example, universities are encouraged to reinforce their commitment to educational 'excellence' or engage more in the sort of applied research that can bestow attractive contracts and grants. As far as public service is concerned, one new imperative is for the University to open itself, out of its "Ivory Tower", to "Society". Here, the network 'magic' casts its spell: the embeddedness of universities in glocalised environments is believed to imply the building and fostering of numerous al-

liances with an increased number of diversified institutional or individual stakeholders, be they other universities, local industry, future students, potential fundraisers, NGOs, ordinary citizens, the mass media, etc. (e.g. McClung & Werner, 2008; Jongbloed et al., 2008). This stakeholder approach originally stemmed from the entrepreneurial sphere. The development and care of those alliances are increasingly thought to be critical to sustaining both the traditional and newly-imposed aspects of a university's missions, but also to build a positive institutional "brand" and engage with societal actors potentially interested in the services it offers. This network framing is often considered, especially by administrators of more precariously positioned small to medium-sized universities, to be a first step toward survival: to put it bluntly, universities are being asked literally to sell their services primarily to industry and, more generally, to a growing body of diversified stakeholders.

However, as we shall see below in the case of social scientists, this outreach may not be defined in the same manner by all the actors involved (administration officials, researchers, policy-makers, citizens, etc.): different conceptions of the outreach as well as the nature of the extra academic actors involved may enter into conflict with each other. According to the European Commission (2003: 4), for instance, one aspect of the knowledge economy and society is that "*new configurations of production,* transmission *and application of knowledge are emerging, and their effect is to involve a greater number of* players*, typically in an* increasingly internationalised network-driven context (emphasis added)"; yet the included terms are highly polysemous.

4. Stakeholders vs. public

Researchers, university officials and policy-makers all agree that the University must interact with "Society". However, the question of *how* and with *whom* needs to be opened up and analysed further. The institutional conception of what constitutes 'the exterior' and who are (shall be) the stakeholders is best exemplified by the new communication strategies this vision generates. A systematic development of the communication apparatus, through which "*information activities [...] have expanded considerably in terms of the number of employees involved, [and have] undergone professionalization as well as upgrading in status*" (Engwall, 2008: 46), is believed to be strategic for a university wishing to dominate an increasingly competitive environment. As a consequence, most European universities now capitalise on entrepreneurial public relations techniques to promote their in-

stitutions and engage in the public sphere. Yet, the manner in which the administrators conceive of their institution's interlocutors does not necessarily concur with the traditional ideal of the public university (see below). Indeed, the current overarching state of mind hovering over the European University considers the university's stakeholders purely as economic agents: universities shall engage with its community - as long as it has the potential, through "university-industry interfaces", "international Erasmus exchanges" or "experts' evaluations of national socioeconomic programs", to enhance the institution (and the state's) economic and cultural capitals on the local, regional, national and international stages.

This style of public relations leaves tracks, such as the specific discourses disseminated on university websites - managed in an instituted competitive environment in which it is vital for the institutions to demarcate and promote themselves. A brief analysis[3] of the hyperlinks placed on university homepages highlights how far this framing distances itself from what the University traditionally considered to be its public and public service in general: these hyperlinks clearly parallel those found on corporate websites (e.g. "University management", "University strategy", "Corporate identity").

This institutional point of view can contradict the professional identity cultivated by university personnel, be they researchers or administration employees. In the past few decades the necessity to engage with wider society has become an important topic at the level of the university administration as well as at the level of faculty. Participatory, civil, public and democratic science – these are the buzzwords that indicate the rise of a "*participatory paradigm*" (Bäckstrand, 2004: 24). In this climate, tensions arise not over whether to engage, but rather over how to engage. In the following sections, we take the example of social scientists, who, we believe, often find themselves in a position where they are torn between their work in the context of a neoliberal framing of engagement outside of the scientific sphere and their self-perception that frames engagement as a public good.

5. The public role of social scientists

In recent years we can discern an emergence of programmatic calls in scientific circles for the restoration of the public role of social scientists in the

3 This is the subject of Jeoffrey Gaspard's PhD thesis.

public sphere (e.g. Clawson et al., 2007; Calhoun, 2009; etc.). The stated mission of public social science is to identify, in cooperation with different publics, the major problems, relevant evidence and persuasive arguments when dealing with public issues. This resurgence of what Splichal (2011: Ch. 4) calls the 'publicness frame' is a response by (some) social scientists to the dominance of neoliberal discourse on the role of the university and the scientist; to the rise of science as a 'financial good' as opposed to science as a 'public good' (Pestre, 2005: 29).

The neoliberal discourse has seeped into discussions on the university, defining the public role of the university and of the scientists as stemming from the source of funding and not from a conception of the public good. The expectation is that those who are paying should benefit and the argumentation is often conflated with the argument for government financing of universities. For example, Smith (2009) frames the public responsibilities of science as being defensible to the public, gaining the support of the public (also e.g. Calhoun, 2006). The same interpretation is the basis for the discourse on the public accountability of science, which is not sustained by responsiveness to public needs, but by performance measurement and 'the audit culture' (Marginson, 2006: 46).

In contrast, the publicness frame, represented in the calls mentioned above, defines the public role of (in this case) the social sciences in the Enlightenment tradition, which postulates an educated citizenry as a necessity for democracy. On the one hand, inquiry, education and full publicity need to replace censorship, bias and prejudice, as well as plain ignorance (Dewey, 1927/1999: 143). The social sciences can contribute to public knowledge and understanding of contemporary society by communicating in the public sphere, providing actors and topics and thereby informing and catalysing the debate concerning public problems. On the other hand, a key role of the social sciences is to critically and reflexively elucidate social phenomena, processes and institutions, contribute to the consideration of new modes of conduct in cases of conflict, difference and exclusion and thereby improve democratic culture.

This understanding of the public role, in contrast to the economic framing, means that the focus is not on direct effects, but the role of the scientists in "*the building of individual and collective capacity with open-ended long term potential*" (Marginson, 2006: 54). Therefore, the proponents of the publicness framing state that not all social scientists need to address public debates directly or focus their research on pressing public matters (Calhoun, 2009; Smith, 2009). Public social science and other types of research which Bura-

woy (2011) has defined as critical, policy and professional social science, are "*mutually interdependent and invigorating*" and therefore contribute to the public good in ways that are different and sometimes intangible.

We are not arguing that the focus on direct effects, efficiency and productivity necessarily clashes with the role of the social scientist, especially as long as it is not a universal directive. Yet, the focus on direct effects has brought pressures to instrumentalise and commercialise knowledge. Thus the democratic potential has been weakened or perhaps sacrificed to better fit the business model (Splichal, 2011: Ch. 4). The transformations of the university in the last few decades have ushered in practices and missions that can be considered to be detrimental to the public role of the university. The tensions between the values of authority and public engagement, thought to be synergetic, have been exacerbated (Calhoun, 2006). Paradoxically, it is these two values that underwrite the institutional imperatives for the university – the University of Excellence engaging beyond the Ivory Tower.

6. Conceptions of engagement in tension

Public engagement and accessibility can be understood in two ways: on the one hand in terms of making knowledge available to society more broadly, including transforming the university from an elite institution to one that is more inclusive, and on the other hand in terms of epistemic openness.

The requirements imposed on social scientists include playing the role of expert and participating in public discussions on topics of public concern, yet other imperatives limit the possibilities and resources needed for this engagement. One important factor is the pre-eminence of quantification in the evaluation of goals, purposes and achievements. This different conception of merit and excellence has a broad impact on the regulations and evaluations of efficiency and productivity, including the reward structure and criteria for academic advancement. The focus on the number of publications in refereed academic journals and academic monographs, impact factors, number of students, evaluation surveys etc allows less time and gives less incentive for engagement in the public sphere. The effects of formal rationality and the mission of empirical research for policy needs "*under the model of positivism and professionalism*," have taken their toll on public engagement and the Humboldtian duty of self-development and the development of democratic culture (Hohendahl, 2005: 3).

In terms of epistemic openness, we argue that the imperatives imparted on social scientists to engage publicly as experts are based on the assumption that there is an 'essential difference' between scientific knowledge and public knowledge. This distinction in thinking about the role of social scientists impedes the rethinking of the relationship between science and democracy (Bender, 1993: 128). John Dewey, for example, rejected this distinction and emphasised that science becomes knowledge when it is "*published, shared, socially accessible*", and only this knowledge, in turn, can inform "*genuine*" public policy (1927/1999: 126, 7). The scientist, therefore, should not be thought of as an expert with special access to 'the truth', but a member of the public imbued with knowledge and an "*apparatus*" – the method – to reach their conclusions (ibid.: 119).

Besides, in the role of the expert, this differentiation can be discerned in the way participatory practices have actually been enacted. Public participation has become a buzzword in policy circles and is, in some cases (e.g. environmental issues), almost obligatory. Although calls for the democratisation of science are also numerous (e.g. Carolan, 2008; Bäckstrand, 2004), the formalisation and institutionalisation of public participation have changed the character of participation from social movements to professional mediation, from confronting values and political ideologies to consensus-seeking (Læssø, 2007), and are usually operationalised in a top-down manner – focusing on teaching, persuading and constructing consent.

7. Authority and engagement in scientific culture

The democratic potential is weakened not just by the directives from outside the scientific sphere, but also by 'scientific cultures'. On the one hand, it is undermined by "*traditional scholarly collegial hierarchies*" and by "*the dynamics of status competition*" (Marginson, 2006: 53). Despite the myth about science as inclusive, universalistic and egalitarian, scientists also engage in "*hoarding and accumulation*" of knowledge (Calhoun, 2006: 31). On the other hand, in the struggle for the autonomy of science, social scientists resist the concept of social relevance determined by others, as well as other criteria in the context of decisions about science funding. The reactions to these impositions in what was supposed to be a self-regulatory institution have sometimes culminated in trends of self-isolation (e.g. Bender, 1993).

In terms of epistemological openness, the essential difference between scientific knowledge and public knowledge is the foundation for the (con-

struction of) authority and autonomy of the scientific sphere. The boundary work of scientists upholds and constructs the identity of a scientific sphere in relation to other disciplines and non-science, but these processes also define the mode of engagement of scientists and can constitute an obstacle for communication and cooperation (Gieryn, 1999; Halffman, 2003). The resulting conflict between public engagement and what is considered academic professionalism imposes constraints on scientists (Bender, 2011), with the potential for disparagement or discrimination looming. Despite calls for the democratisation of science, that is, acknowledging non-scientific actors as partners (Lindskog and Sundqvist, 2004: 209), social scientists (among others) often consider the role of the public *post festum* - their inclusion takes place in the third act, concerning their support or opposition and not in the earlier stages of problem identification or research planning. And although the social sciences are discursively engaged in public issues (e.g. Kyvik, 2005), the democratic participation of citizens, which is essential for any political conceptualisation of the public, is by and large absent.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter, we highlight the tensions between the trends of marketisation of the university in Europe and the conception of the public university harking back to the early and mid-20th century ideal. We discern a tension between two different views on the public role of universities in today's society. On the one hand, institutional strategies frame the role of the (social) 'scientist as expert' - in their collaborations with stakeholders, engagement with the public, in preparing students for the labour market: that is, in fulfilling the needs of a Knowledge Society. On the other hand, the self-understanding (or perhaps aspirations) of many social scientists is represented in the role of the 'scientist as public scholar', addressing public issues, informing public understanding and engaging with the public beyond the pure dissemination of facts.

These increasing tensions and related upsurge in discussions about the university and public social science, as well as so-called 'slow science'[4], are not just the result of the cumulative effects of the neoliberal agenda. There have been economic pressures in connection with efficiency, productivity and accountability before. The difference now is that, besides the normalisation of the economic framing, it has gained hegemony by

4 http://www.slow-science.org

subverting the notion of the public good and democratic participation, and framed it as the basis for global competitiveness and socioeconomic well-being.

Increasing tensions also arise in the different conceptions of autonomy and authority. On the one hand, new trends frame autonomy as the autonomy of the university as a whole and authority as relating to an 'institutional way-of-being': the scientist, then, represents and promotes the university, selling his or her knowledge as expertise. On the other hand, social scientists understand autonomy as the autonomy of the scientist within the university and relate authority to a 'way-of-being based in practice': the scientist, then, represents and promotes his or her field of research and science in general. Yet, the actual public role of the university is not essentially determined from the outside: as we have shown, the scientists' conceptions of authority can sometimes be in tension with their self-understanding or aspirations concerning their public engagement. Scientists do not always treat their work and knowledge as a public good – rather they jealously guard accumulated knowledge and epistemic territory in an attempt to secure their authority.

The transformations of the European University we have highlighted are ideal-typical in the sense that we have tried to capture the 'essence' of this institutional metamorphosis. In this process, discourses shape the behaviours, visions, practices and identities cultivated in these institutions. Nevertheless, the terms "Neoliberal University", the "Knowledge Economy", the "European Research Area", etc. are often considered as *real* entities that have an inescapable and direct influence on our practices, yet they do not stand by themselves. What holds these entities together is the intertwining of discourse-shaped socio-institutional structures which are, in turn, what we make of them.

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