

# One-dimensional university realised: Capitalist ethos and ideological shifts in Higher Education

**Filip Vostal, Lorenzo Silvaggi, Rosa Vasilaki**

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*In the last two decades, states and other stakeholders across all continents have been developing systematic policies that have significantly transformed the fundamental tenets of the university: academic freedom, curiosity-driven scholarship, research and pedagogy. The present article aims to explore the discursive framework through which such transformations have been shaped and presented by way of looking at its ideological presuppositions and political consequences. To do so, the authors, firstly, highlight the capitalist logic behind the current attempts to redefine the ethos of Higher Education through the analysis of a particular debate among academic and educational leaders. Secondly, they focus on the way in which these logics are effectively reproduced within the academic environment through specific patterns of subjectification. Finally, the article argues that the ideological patterns examined here are successfully attempting to impose an exclusionary and instrumental conception of knowledge functional to the neoliberal agenda.*

*Keywords: capitalist ethos, neoliberalism, Higher Education, Žižek, knowledge, ideology*

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## Introduction

An unprecedented assault on Higher Education (HE) has been taking place in Europe and elsewhere. In the last two decades, states and other stakeholders across all continents have been developing systematic policies that have significantly transformed the fundamental tenets of the university: academic freedom, curiosity-driven scholarship, research and pedagogy. 'Budget cuts, efficiency reforms, new ways of cost-sharing

and of managing degrees, tuition-fee rises, privatisation and selective strategies for excellence' (Corbett 2011) have been major concerns of many academics and students alike. In the last two years, they took to the streets and launched occupations in many parts of Europe such as – Ireland, Austria, Greece, Italy, Denmark, Croatia, Finland, Spain, France, Holland, and the UK – and beyond, for instance in Puerto Rico, Argentina, United States, Canada and Iran. International financial insti-

tutions, policy makers, governments in alliances with industries, business interest groups and think tanks have been constructing a new model of HE which radically reinvents the core pillars of the academy. Universities are now competing in the global arena and are expected to be accountable engines of economic growth. It is expected that HE as the producer of high-skilled brainpower, high-tech knowledge and innovations is and will be the major motor and stabilizer of economic systems. Not only has this purely economic conception of HE provoked strong opposition and resulted in political tensions, but it is also becoming increasingly doubtful whether economically driven education will lead to greater individual and collective prosperity.

These developments are taking place within the context of the hegemonic discourse of 'knowledge-driven economy', a key strategic imaginary that seeks to resolve the ongoing problems of capital accumulation evolving since the crisis of Fordism. The neoliberal project – which dates back to the 1970s and mostly the 1980s – has been seeking to implement and universalise the ideology of laissez-faire market economics and restore the global capitalist system. This has meant sustained economic restructuring and social and political readjustment (see Harvey 1989). Importantly, one of the most significant aspects of the project has been to strengthen

ties and relationships between HE and global, regional and national economies. Ever since, discussions about the organisation and purpose of knowledge production and about the institutional setting and governance of universities have been dominated by analyses of the methods and ways in which universities best fulfil their economic function (Boulton & Lucas 2008). With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the ubiquity of information and communication technologies and subsequent extensiveness and intensiveness of capitalism, these discussions have acquired a global significance. Even though approaches focusing strictly on developments of national HE systems may currently appear limited due to the changing national and world orders and the global nature of contemporary capitalism (Robertson 2010), we will use the case of the UK to illustrate certain hegemonic tendencies taking place – albeit in various degrees – on a global scale. We have chosen the UK as a case study for two reasons. Firstly, the transformation of HE under neoliberal auspices in the UK has a longer tradition rooted in the 1970s. Secondly, the UK can serve as a 'laboratory' where we can microscopically detect and dissect trends and tendencies which also occur elsewhere but are either not as visible or not yet as fully 'developed'.

By focusing on the UK as an exemplary case study, we aim to

deploy the global relevance of the political questions raised by the ongoing opposition to the present reform by large sectors of university staff and student body. How is the role of HE and the university as an institution being reframed? What types of subjectivities emerge? How is the concept of knowledge being transformed? This paper addresses these compelling questions by operating on different layers of inquiry. Firstly, we highlight the capitalist logic behind the current attempts to redefine the ethos of HE through the analysis of a particular debate among academic and educational leaders, and by looking at the processes of subjectification operating within the new neoliberal landscape. Secondly, we address the specific significance and implications of such logics by investigating the emergence and dissemination of an exclusionary and instrumental conception of knowledge. Finally, we will refer to the theoretical framework developed by Slavoj Žižek to relate the above mentioned processes with their wider ideological implications and to delineate the possibility of an alternative, emancipatory valence of knowledge. In summary, we aim to demonstrate how the neoliberal restructuring of HE albeit operating at different levels tends to reduce the various instances under analysis (ultimately intellectual life itself) to what Marcuse (1964) defined as 'one-dimensionality', namely to an exclusivist

criterion of rationality instrumental to the logic of capital accumulation.

### **The 'Grand Challenges' discourse: towards a new higher education ideology**

In order to frame the discussion, we will now explore a particular ongoing debate among several representatives of big universities, academic leaders and senior administrators published on the influential *GlobalHigherEd* blog (GlobalHigherEd n.d).<sup>1</sup> This debate provides rich material from which we can reconstruct the essence of the new 'spirit' or ethos of the university and disclose what 'idea' of the university it may embody. The project of transformation that emerges from this debate is composed of three inter-related features: 1) The university should be an active economic and social interventionist; which 2) provides solutions to the world's 'real problems' – whatever they are; and 3) produces high-powered job qualifications – meaning that instead of full human beings and full citizens, it forms and shapes human capital subjected to market fluctuations like any other capital or commodity (cf. de Sousa Santos 2010).

Apart from a few exceptions most of the academic leaders taking part in the debate at *GlobalHigherEd* seem fascinated with what has been called 'grand challenges' (global poverty, environmental threats, energy resources, economic stability

and inequality, international security etc.) and suggest that universities and HE have to address these challenges at the pace they deserve – which essentially means immediately and effectively. Organisational structures, ethical and intellectual missions of universities should be subordinated to the needs for the resolution of these grand challenges. A global agenda for tackling the most burning issues must be developed, articulated and put into practice. As the initiator of the debate Nigel Thrift, vice-chancellor of the University of Warwick, claims: '[First], it could be argued that universities are the primary intellectual fire-fighters in the current situation, not least because that responsibility has increasingly been abrogated by so many other actors. Second, the vast majority of universities have always – quite rightly – taken their ethical responsibilities to the world seriously...Third, if the situation is really so serious, perhaps it could be argued that we are now on a kind of war footing and need to act accordingly' (2010).

Thrift normatively assumes that the main and the only function of a new globally operating university should be primarily problem-solving of planetary issues. Hence, he implicitly sets up a meta-framework which renders knowledge production *teleological*. Among canvassers reacting to Thrift, David Skorton, president of Cornell University, acknowledges Thrift's assumption:

'The world is increasingly turning to HE to develop and share the knowledge needed to solve its most critical problems' (Skorton 2010). In a similar vein, Daniel Linzer, provost of Northwestern University, claims that universities should be organized in 'such a way as to enable the big problems of the day to be tackled effectively' (2010). Lucia Rodriguez from Columbia University is concerned whether universities are doing 'all they can to prepare their students for the complex challenges facing this interconnected and interdependent global community'; and maintains that 'universities have a role in training and developing the problem-solvers of the world' (2010). These statements represent a general attitude of other discussants and indeed embody a discourse of the pressing need to address issues that have a global scope. Even though the existence of 'global community' is exaggerated or at least debatable, it must be said that the calls for tackling global challenges are legitimate and universities should address the problems emerging in our epoch – and they indeed do.

However, there are at least two problems in framing the purpose of HE in this particular perspective. First, by accepting a certain paradigm of intervention, what this discourse of grand challenges and even grander remedying visions neglects is that universities are also significant *contributors* to the

world's critical problems because they largely reproduce dominant economic system(s). Thus, one of the fundamental instances that is missing in these debates is that most of the academic leaders create these visions as if HE, universities, science and pedagogy existed somewhere *outside* social formations and economic structures. The way in which universities should address the global challenges in the neoliberal framework essentially further reinforce a given *status quo* and the dominant ideology. The discussants portray HE as a readily and always available 'toolbox' that provides solutions for societal and economic ills. To put it briefly, if there is a problem – which according to the debate is always global – universities should come up with an appropriate solution to address it. However, this picture is radically undermined once we problematise the whole redemptive telos implicitly attributed to the smooth running of neoliberal economy by the grand challenges discourse. We claim that universities themselves – especially particular curricula – may be at the core of those grand problems and challenges that academic leaders so zealously address and vie with each other in coming up with ever-more spectacular, planetary and safeguarding visions. It could be argued that mainstream, orthodox or 'bourgeois economics' (O'Connor 1973) dominate particular university curricula and arguably (re)pro-

duce the neoliberal ideology. Business schools and the disciplines of finance, management and accounting situated within universities and HE sectors (for-profit MBA schools) are the very centres of reproduction of the dominant capitalist logic. Thus one must concur with Dunne *et al.* (2008) when they argue that business curricula are 'Trojan horses' of modern capitalism and training sites whereof neoliberal subjectivity is generated and moulded.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is doubtful to claim that these highly popular subjects and degrees generate and provide 'knowledge that improves the world' – as will be clarified below.

Secondly, the debate itself to a large degree reads as an 'advertising billboard' whereby various institutions compete among each other in providing ever-better solutions for the grand challenges. As one of the critical voices in the debate maintains, the 'solution-seeking culture' broadly means that the "fairly traditionalist structure" of "curiosity-driven projects" is giving way to a "fast and effective" modality, enabling us [academics] to "keep pace" with the big challenges, for which we need to "copy the organizations that work the best" (McLennan 2010). In a rather self-celebratory way, other contributions in the blog debate usually foreground the very institution they represent as *the one* that works and addresses the global challenges the best – efficiently and rapidly. Although Thrift's main call was to

think about increased academic and scientific collaboration across the globe, almost every single reply is conceived of as the presentation of the 'more-or-less-successful' vision and competitive tactic by an institution that a particular discussant represents. Thrift's rather dramatic plea for increased 'business of scientific cooperation [which] now needs to go on apace and perhaps even as one of the conditions of the survival of the species' (2010) is understood by the majority of debate participants as an opportunity to promote their institutions' past and/or present attempts to tackle and resolve planetary problems.

From a Marxist perspective this means that universities and academic leaders have ended up being (willingly) responsible for solving problems for the establishment – which are essentially capital-related problems (Harvie 2000). In this vein it is possible to argue that the entrepreneurial and competitive spirit that underpins this 'idea of university', which will face and solve global challenges and 'real problems' resembles a 'university without idea' (Fish 2005) wherein core pillars of the modern university such as critique, culture, education and curiosity-driven inquiry lie in ruins. In turn, capital can shape and load HE and universities in line with its demands. According to an Enlightenment thinker Johann Gottlieb Fichte 'the University exists not to teach information but to inculcate

the exercise of critical judgement' (Readings 1996: 6) and as we discuss below, this dimension is gradually and systematically trailing off. In this sense – however apocalyptic it may sound – the university as a modern institution and the site of society's intellectual gravity ceases to function and – despite the calls to collaborate – we are entering an era of one-dimensional 'knowledge business' institutions.

The call for a 'new social contract' between HE institutions and society is largely constructed around research, scientific inquiry, scholarship and pedagogy. It suggests a particular trajectory and direction not only of the university as such, but also of knowledge production and of the purpose and role of education in general. Essentially, a new consensus, 'common sense' and normalcy about the mission of the university and the role of HE is being produced. However, it must be noted that this is a very exclusionary and specific conception: university degrees are to be understood as credentials for job markets and knowledge is increasingly becoming a commodity. In the words of Slaughter and Rhoades: 'In the new economy, knowledge is a critical raw material to be mined and extracted from any unprotected site; patented, copyrighted, trademarked or held as a trade secret; then sold in the marketplace for a profit' (2004: 4). Nevertheless, the emerging discourse – such as the



one that has been taking place on the pages of *GlobalHigerEd* blog – that frames the *raison d’etre* of the university considerably masks corporate, managerial, and competitive imperatives. The fabric and structure of HE is being strategically reconfigured and recalibrated and subsequently academic practices, realities, values and meanings acquire new contents. Therefore, what appears to be a progressive and redemptive ethos governing the new ‘enlightened’ purpose of the university is, in essence, an offspring of the ongoing convergence of science, research, education and the circuit of capital.

### **The neoliberal subject**

In order to further illustrate what this particular (neoliberal) vision of HE entails in terms of subjectification, let us take as an example the recommendations about the future of HE as expressed in one of the most recent attempts to systematise the current trends advocating for the reform of universities in the UK, i.e. the Browne report (Browne 2010).<sup>3</sup> According to the – one-dimensionally economic – definition of HE offered by the report: ‘Higher education matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity’ (2010). The statement makes it clear that universities are not thought of anymore as a public

good but merely as a financial investment. However it also demonstrates that their primary aim is not to provide education in the humanist sense, i.e. in the sense of developing the full potential of the self, as a citizen, as a social and political subject, as an employee and so on, but rather a certain kind of training, one that forms young people into identical copies of the neoliberal *homo economicus*: ‘Higher education matters because it transforms the lives of individuals. On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next’ (2010). The only transformation that matters in the lives of ‘individuals’ (notice here the choice of vocabulary which puts the emphasis on the individual whilst eliding any notion of collectivity such as ‘society’) is the possibility to pursue an endless job hunting ‘from the one job to the next’. What also goes unnoticed in this short but extremely revealing definition of the purpose of HE is the presupposition of the precariousness of employment. The phrase from the ‘one job to the next’ implies that for the neoliberal reformers the university is only part of the general dismantlement of the ontological security that underpins the life of the modern subject. In this neoliberal perspective then, precariousness can start even earlier in life, at the moment one attends HE which becomes hence-

forth a kind of mortgage. As Vernon (2010) notices: 'Higher education is now modelled on the types of financial speculation that has helped get us in to this mess'. Students are encouraged to get expensive loans based on an imagined income and to hypothecate their future from the perspective of a non-guaranteed and most likely precarious job with only speculative earning power.

But there is more that goes unquestioned under the proposed restructuration of HE into the one-dimensional economic perspective. In addition to the illusion of the university degree as a highly profitable investment, prospective students are also led to believe that they are in a position to dictate their views, expectations and needs to the university curricula via the market rules of demand and supply, choice and competition. The new mantra of 'student satisfaction' shifts the focus of education from learning into consumption and the instant satisfaction associated with contemporary consumerism. The empowered 'student-customer' is led to believe that, in this way, s/he becomes sovereign over his/her investment, over the degree product s/he purchases. The empowered students are invited to join the 'e-bay' system, where their purchasing power will decide – always on the basis of product satisfaction – whether university staff will keep or lose their jobs, or whether courses and departments have a reason to exist. As Collini (2010)

notices students are not always in a position to know, until long after their graduation, whether a particular line of study is worth pursuing. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Kant or Hegel may not offer immediate satisfaction to undergraduate students but familiarising oneself with difficult and nonetheless essential material is what creates the infrastructure for future inquiry, healthy curiosity and intellectual development. Besides, as Williams (2010) astutely reiterates through John Henry Newman, 'the biggest problem with posing high levels of student satisfaction as the principal outcome of education is that this is not always compatible with intellectual challenge, which is surely the real purpose of higher education'. If teachers feel under pressure to keep the levels of student satisfaction up, then difficult, challenging, controversial or unsettling material - as it is for instance in the case of studies dealing with cultural difference, ethical, medical or biological issues – may well be avoided in order not to upset the customer-king.

Nevertheless, even if the empowered student-customer seems sovereign over the brand name of the degree product s/he is purchasing, that same student is quite powerless when s/he faces the subtle power of technologies of control, which already are an indispensable part of the postgraduate curricula. Often under the banner of minimising the misuse of power from thesis



supervisors or other authorities of the institution as well as an opportunity to measure 'how much you have done', a wide range of assessment and self-assessment exercises are being imposed on PhD candidates in universities across England. Naturally, assessment is part of any meaningful process of intellectual progress; nonetheless, the endless bureaucratic completion of forms, which often measure progress in terms of conferences and training courses attended (and where, for instance, there is no space and time for a six-month reading of Hegel or Kant) and request the ultimate confirmation by authorities such as the Deans of Faculties who have little idea about the topic or substantial progress of x or y PhD student, poses certain questions about the real purpose of such assessment exercises. The constant monitoring and self-monitoring of the student in order to develop an employable personality is a prime example of the technologies of disciplining the self and of biopower at work, as systematically explored by Foucault throughout his oeuvre about modern subjectification (1997, 2004). In other words, what is at stake here is the shaping of the subjectivity of students and their formation according to the discipline of the market. 'Aims and objectives', ratings, quantifiable outcomes, 'public engagement', 'business awareness' are telling examples which bear witness to the way the market economy has

already left its mark on HE.

The debate on *GlobalHigherEd* blog analysed above as well as the way its vision currently materialises in concrete processes of subjectification strongly suggest a future direction of the ideology of HE. There is a peculiar dialectic at play though. First, redemptive, interventionist and entrepreneurial ideas conceal the role of HE institutions in the origins and formations of grand challenges. Second, the generation of these redemptive visions is imbued with the imperative of competition and underpinned by the market ideology. This gives us a blueprint whereof we can situate further investigation. What is concealed in HE ideology and in the new seemingly progressive ethos is the revenue orientation, profit motive and the foregrounding of an economic benefit of knowledge. Bourdieu suggests that in the neoliberal discourse 'the economic world is a pure and perfect order, implacably unrolling the logic of its predictable consequences...prompt[ing] to repress all violations by the sanctions that it inflicts...' (Bourdieu 1998). This succinctly articulated principle unfolds the dominant element in the contemporary ideology of HE whilst materially and discursively informing the conception of knowledge we investigate below. Using economic parameters, policy makers, politicians and many academic leaders have to be inevitably selective when they favour a certain type of knowl-

edge over another, which means that there is a need to define and bracket 'useful' and 'useless' knowledge. And this false usefulness/uselessness dichotomy is formed *predominantly* along the lines of economic benefit. Contemporary attempts to define what exactly the content of knowledge should be tend to reduce and essentialise its historically shaped, yet ineffable, meaning and content according to the codes and practices of commerce, business and entrepreneurialism. As noted among others by Harvie (2000), we are witnessing the enclosure of knowledge commons and the formation of capital-related proprietary knowledge which mobilises as well as generates capital. From this specific standpoint we will now elaborate on the changing conception of the idea of knowledge and its shifting meaning(s).

### **Realism and fantasy in the new ideology of Higher Education**

The exclusionary dynamics described in the previous section can be clarified further by exploring the way in which the concept of knowledge as an empty signifier<sup>4</sup> is being successfully hegemonized and ideologically reframed by the dominant neoliberal discourse. In order to explain the effectiveness of such hegemonic operation, we will draw selectively on Žižek's combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis. As illustrated by the Lacanian philosopher, psychoanalytical categories

– by focusing on the affective relation of individuals with their socio-symbolic environment – can contribute to clarifying the mechanisms behind the subjective investment in ideological patterns functional to the reproduction of specific institutional policies. Accordingly, this section aims to reconstruct the interaction between the dominant form of managerial 'objectivism' in HE and the 'fantasy' framework which – by envisaging an a-political common good beyond contingent contradictions – enables its successful dissemination.

In the first place, the necessity of the process of neoliberalisation – the new role of the university under neoliberalism described in the previous sections – is justified in the UK through variants of the classic Thatcherite 'There Is No Alternative'. In other words, the sound, 'down to earth', problem-solving approach described by a growing number of zealous policy makers composes an overall 'realist' frame. Its peculiar form of expression is the 'call to responsibility' in a moment of crisis. As pointed out by numerous commentators, the mainstream presentation of the overall economic crisis follows similar patterns: the economic breakdown is used to justify the implementation of specific neoliberal logics – logics which, incidentally, contributed to the crisis in the first place (Harvey 2010, Klein 2007).

This discourse is meant to com-

pel us – interpellated as responsible citizens – to accept and support the restructuring of HE. It can be helpful to recapitulate some of the major consequences implied by this process: 1) the shift from a concept of university as a service offering the right of education to citizens to a corporate enterprise doing business with clients, in a peculiar condition of state-regulated competition with other enterprises; 2) the proliferation and growing importance of assessment exercises, rankings, leagues and tables, indispensable tools for Taylorising and optimising knowledge production and 3) the unavoidable related worsening of work conditions for staff that have to research and teach in the situation of precariousness and constant pressure (Callinicos 2006).

Within this context, the realist approach affects directly the content of academic research by delineating specific criteria to assess and separate valuable from dispensable knowledge – in other words, what is worth funding and what is not. Such distinction is implemented through the above mentioned ‘neutral’ tools of measurement. The ‘call to responsibility’ is directed at arts and humanities in particular: in this difficult moment – so the discourse goes in the UK – research needs to demonstrate its usefulness in relation to the real problems of our era. In this perspective, only two categories of knowledge are deemed worthy: knowledge that can promote

economic growth but also knowledge that can ‘ease’ social tensions. In the words of the UK Department of Education and Skills: ‘Our national ability to master that process of change ... depends critically upon our universities. Our future success depends ... on using that knowledge and understanding to build economic strength and social harmony... we have to make better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation’ (Department for Education and Skills 2003: 2).

This vision translates in the current ‘fetishism of impact’, informing – among other similar initiatives at EU level – the current ‘Pathways to impact program’ developed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The AHRC is the main UK public body which distributes governmental funds for postgraduate projects and research in the Arts and Humanities (currently, the Council is sponsored by the UK Department of Business, Innovations and Skills). As stated in the AHRC website, ‘The research councils define impact as the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. (...) It is necessary to show public value from public funding.’ (AHRC n.d). The AHRC website provides a number of precious examples of useful or ‘impact-driven’ research:

Practice-led design research that tackles crime... Impacts include: Improving the UK’s economic

competitiveness by creating new innovative products, such as chairs and clips that reduce the opportunity for bag theft...Creating consultative multi-stakeholder networks that deliver multi-agency approaches that generate new solutions to reducing crime... There have also been international links. For example, Grippa, an anti-theft bag clip...was shown at the 'Safe – Design Takes on Risk' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This attracted interest from the Manhattan Robbery Squad and Starbucks Senior Management, highlighting how relatively simple dissemination activities...can lead towards making links with potential users and beneficiaries (AHRC. nd.b)

It is worth stressing how the worth of a research project is ultimately sanctioned by agents such as 'Starbucks Senior Management' and the 'Manhattan Robbery Squad'.

The call to responsibility is sustained by urgency – as the problems are well-known, we only need to act. Any political and intellectual effort implying a reflection on the systemic nature of problems, confronted with the *urgency* of the situation, is constantly invited to recede. The great challenges are practical, technical, whilst the political origin of the 'objective conditions' demanding adaptive compliance dissolves in the background: we, as academic workers, have to cope with objective restric-

tions set by universities, universities with competition and governmental policies, governments, finally, with the 'natural' laws of the market. The origin of the problems is as remote as a natural occurrence.

### **The fantasy of engagement**

As anticipated, it is possible to individuate at the very core of the realist conception a specific variant of the classic fantasy of 'social harmony'. In general terms, it is possible to define the concept of 'fantasy' (within Lacanian oriented discourse analysis) as a construct which supports the subject's affective investment in specific, contestable social arrangements by displacing structural contradictions in contingent impediments. As pointed out by Žižek (1989, 1999) the dominant ideological framework presents nowadays a fantasy expurgated of antagonism, in which the arbitrary organizational role of the 'master' is taken up by the 'chain of knowledge'. In other words, individual and social harmony depend entirely on the subject's ability to perform an objective set of 'correct' operations, rather than on overcoming an external obstacle. It is only logical that universities, as 'knowledge factories', hold a central role in this process: they are supposed to inform policies by providing concrete plans of action.

This fantasy framework is at its purest in the myth of engagement: universities can gain public legitimacy only by 'engaging with the com-

munity'. 'Community' represents the empty signifier *par excellence* in contemporary public discourse: the term (like 'nation' or 'race' in specific socio-historical contexts), by envisaging 'something more' than any meaning attached to it – e.g. a metaphysical 'social harmony' beyond any specific semantic referent – acquires a strong affective value. In other words, the elusive conceptualization of 'community' plays a central role in the way subjects construct their identity vis-à-vis the socio-political context in which they operate. In this perspective, the 'engagement with the community' mantra provides – as we hope to illustrate – the moral undertone supplementing the aforementioned instrumental framework: in a 'post-ideological' era, universities are called to contribute by solving the 'real problems' of 'real people'.

The ideological manoeuvre behind this engagement model needs further clarification: the fantasy of the communitarian space in the first place hypostatizes two agents (university and community), then obliterates the line of fracture that traverses both (thus naturalising neoliberalism) by delineating 'shared problems' and 'common goals'. The discursive production of this inter-classist space is the condition of possibility of the objectivist-realist de-politicisation: the usefulness of knowledge can be assessed only insofar as there is a pre-given, conception of the common good –

a concept which, we argue, is being silently hegemonized by neoliberal imperatives such as 'economic growth and social harmony'. The discourse concerning the role of HE is thus marked by a central displacement: the contradictions which characterise the university, as well as other institutions driven within the circuit of capital, are hidden by re-framing the concept of engagement as action towards an external object (the grand challenges).

It is necessary to point out here how this fantasy framework legitimises only two conceptions of knowledge. The easier to detect is the hardcore realist one – knowledge as contribution to productivity and social control. However, it is possible to draw attention to a more insidious aspect of the logic underlying the imposition of the 'impact' parameter in social and human sciences. What makes 'impact' find supporters, even amongst the disciplines which are the most affected by its imposition, is the trivialisation of social struggles, which allowed the populism of 'community' or 'public engagement' to spring forth. The subversive content of the social and political causes of the 1960s and 1970s which strove for the politicisation of scholarship – as anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic – were emptied in the process of its assimilation into the academe (Ahmad 1997). From a locus of dissent, universities were transformed into a locus of normalisation where social

and political struggles have been reduced into parameters of 'social identities and divisions' ('gender', 'race', 'ethnicity' and so on) which allow the researcher to secure better chances in the competition for funding<sup>5</sup> and to subconsciously contribute to the elimination of the subversive or dissenting - *and in the last instance political* – content of such categories of analysis. Throughout this process the production of knowledge has been shaped in a relation of oppositional determination vis-à-vis the 'arid' economic criteria and the positivist organizational principles imposed by the establishment. According to the engagement discourse, the impact of research needs to be measured in terms of its capacity to provide advocacy for disadvantaged groups or excluded 'Others', as well as to enlarge democratic participation and promote social inclusion.

The problem with these forms of opposition is that they share the same imaginary frame provided by the dominant discourse – they exclusively locate knowledge in the field of positivity, thus characterising its pursuit as a necessarily constructive endeavour. In this perspective, both the economic and the 'engaged' variant can arguably refer to the Lacanian 'discourse of the university' (Žižek 2008). Such variants delineate a type of knowledge that can operate only within the objective constraints and normative criteria that have been set in advance

by/within a given socio-symbolic system. Universities are called to provide the 'know-how' to reach universal goals (a more or less 'noumenal' common good), which the community recognises as its own. Social responsibility equates in this perspective to social reproduction.

### **Knowledge and/or emancipation?**

Within the above mentioned framework, the production of knowledge is bound to result in the foreclosure of politics – intending with politics the act of setting the very criteria against which usefulness is tested. In contrast with this conception, we will attempt to delineate briefly a different valence of knowledge – a valence which, arguably, has been constantly operating within the humanist tradition (at least as its obverse) and which is being completely excluded by the dominant ideology operating in HE. Such valence can be described by referring – in very broad terms – to the interrelation between a cognitive and an affective emancipatory dimension.

The first dimension can be related to the possibility of providing a cognitive map of the 'social unconscious'; intended here not in the Freudian sense (e.g. related to the processes of repression variously associated to the Oedipal complex), but as the network of unintended consequences and relations determining the subject's position in the social whole (Ciattini 2005). Knowl-



edge in this perspective operates on both a synchronic and diachronic axis. Synchronically, it traces the network of relations that determine otherwise idiosyncratic, apparently autonomous social phenomena (e.g. questioning the very premises behind the grand challenges). In this perspective, knowledge allows both the transformation of contingency (disparate heterogeneity) into necessity (the works of a system, e.g. neoliberal capitalism) and the wider relevance of the subject's actions *vis-à-vis* the reproduction or challenge of his/her socio-symbolic surroundings. Diachronically, it allows the de-naturalisation of social objectivity by reconstructing the historical-political (thus contingent) inception of otherwise 'natural' institutional frameworks and power relations. In this perspective, emancipatory knowledge is meant to open up a space of political intervention beyond the ideologically grounded objectivity of the existing social arrangements and the positivistic criteria of functionality grounding their reproduction.

However, uncovering the objective mechanisms structuring a given socio-economic formation does not automatically result in subjective emancipation. As pointed out by Žižek (1989), the dominant ideology in late capitalist societies – e.g. in Anglo-culture academic circles – includes and welcomes a certain degree of mistrust or cynical distance towards the working of the capitalist

system. Such mistrust – by marking a symbolic, discursive distance – leaves untouched the more fundamental structuration of the subject's desire and identity, thus assuring its participation in ideological social practices shaped by neoliberal imperatives. In other words, neoliberalism is not only a worldview but a deeper set of practices, which reproduces specific patterns of subjectification.

It is possible to introduce here the above mentioned second emancipatory dimension consubstantial with the 'useless' knowledge presently driven out from HE. Such dimension refers specifically to the way in which the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, independently from the dissemination of specific-positive ontic contents, can work to undermine the subject's affective dependency from its socio-symbolic surroundings. In other words, knowledge can unsettle the process through which, beyond explicit discursive acceptance or rejection, the subject spontaneously constructs its identity through the medium of pre-existing ideological formations.

Arguably, it could be possible to describe this conception of knowledge in relation to the Lacanian 'discourse of the analyst' (Žižek 2008). In extremely general terms, the analyst does not provide the subject with pragmatic solutions, but confronts him/her with the absence of a complete (pre-fixed) meaning and identity, thus undermining the

fantasy framework of an 'objectively effective' course of action. As a result, the subject is estranged from the naturalness of the given, thus called to assume his/her investment in the partial, unbalanced political decision at the basis of any socio-symbolic arrangement. From this perspective it is perhaps possible to delineate a dynamic valence of knowledge, whose aim is not to subsume the object, but to unsettle the subject's adaptive engagement with a given field of objectivity. Whilst this operation is what could be called 'an end in itself', it is arguably central to reactivating the space of 'undecidability' necessary for the emergence of any radical political project.

It is important here to clarify two points: firstly, this endeavour cannot be defined (immediately) in relation to a particular content, it is rather a form of sensibility or anxiety – an awareness of the thinness of reality – that can be developed only by means of dialectical mediation. From this perspective, the contemporary focus on 'critical thinking' and 'reflexivity' represents only a form of reification typical of instrumental reason. The emergence of critique, the de-naturalisation of reality, arguably implies a process which cannot be immediately signified – it is rather the byproduct of a disinterested effort of understanding something (a product of thought) in its radical otherness, beyond instrumental subsumption. This is what can happen by studying a Greek

tragedy, the development of English poetry in the 19th century, the work of a particular philosopher, but also in the process of reading literature or tracing the historical development of a social phenomenon. Through this effort, the subject is indirectly estranged from its cultural context, thus confronted with the limits and contingency underpinning its own symbolic identity and/or categories of analysis.

Secondly, the aforementioned valence of knowledge (in both its cognitive and affective dimensions) is not only incompatible with economic criteria of usefulness, but with the very concept of utility. It is not a knowledge that can tell us what to do to solve social problems, however practically or morally compelling they might be. In other words, it cannot be thought in terms of positivity; otherwise it would fall again within the instrumental framework that we have been describing. Accordingly, it cannot directly result in the establishment of a new objectivity, normativity, or in a universalist political project. What this knowledge can do and, historically, has been doing is not devising solutions on demand, but creating new problems by undermining the fixity and naturalness of dominant ideological constellations and identities.

In terms of political action, it is possible to delineate to further considerations. The type of endeavour we have been describing can neither be defended referring to its

economic impact, nor to its wider long-term societal effects or potentialities, but only in terms of a precise political choice. In other words, a rupture is needed from the apologetic framework which attempts to justify the 'objective worth' of 'blue sky thinking'. The point is rather that only *curiosity-driven* intellectual enquiry can open up the space for contesting the very idea of worth and utility reproduced by the dominant ideology. In this perspective, preserving and diffusing the so-called 'useless' knowledge is central in order to break with neoliberal realism and contest the very notion of common good and social harmony which underpins it.

### Conclusion

The trends described throughout this paper, i.e. the transformation of the university in line with the imperatives of the capitalist ethos, the increasing prominence of an exclusionary and instrumental conceptualisation of knowledge and the conditioning of subjectivity according to the discipline of the market, favour the emergence of a generalised condition of instrumentalization not only of HE but of intellectual life itself.<sup>6</sup> In other words, they create the conditions of rise of a 'pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this

universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension' as Marcuse explains in his seminal *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). The neoliberal blackmail of 'elite' education of 'ivory towers' versus the 'pragmatic' education of 'real problems' to which there is only one choice and one alternative – that of disciplining knowledge, politics and society to the logic of the market – needs to be superseded in order to imagine the university beyond the elitism of the past and the presentist discourse of market capitalism. Dissecting the dominant neoliberal ideology requires the intrinsic critical power of arts, humanities and interpretive social sciences more than ever. 'In the totalitarian era', Marcuse (1964) urges us again:

the therapeutic task of philosophy would be a political task, since the established universe of ordinary language tends to coagulate into a totally manipulated and indoctrinated universe. Then politics would appeal in philosophy, not as a special discipline or object of analysis, nor as a special political philosophy, but as the intent of its concepts to comprehend the un-mutilated reality.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A major forum that monitors and maps developments in the global HE landscape.

<sup>2</sup> However, note here that there is also a rather non-conventional and highly critical and progressive stream within business schools themselves, for instance Critical Management Studies (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott (eds) 2003; Parker 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The Browne report is the outcome of The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance which was launched on the 9th November 2009. As stated on the report's webpage 'The review was tasked with making recommendations to Government on the future of fees policy and financial support for full and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students', <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/>

<sup>4</sup> An empty signifier is a concept that does not present a fixed referent but acquires a particular meaning in relation to its position in a given discursive ensemble.

<sup>5</sup> The anxiety about securing funding and a more permanent position in the university is also manifested in the im-

perative of 'publish-or-perish' which results in endless variations and recycling of the same research in order to improve the number of publications (for the accelerated production and proliferation of publications in social sciences see Gilbert 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Even though the case we make here draws predominantly on the developments of HE in the UK, it must be noted that similar tendencies and trends are indeed evident elsewhere – for instance in the US (Aronowitz 2008, Slaughter & Rhoades 2004), Australia (Marginson & Considine 2000) and broadly in Europe (Lock & Lorenz 2007).

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