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**The Political Economy of Mass Higher Education:
Privatisation and Nationalisation**

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Higher Education: Privatisation
and Nationalisation***

*A Paper by
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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION: PRIVATISATION AND NATIONALISATION

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Introduction

The subject of this (lecture/paper) is the political economy of mass higher education – and, in particular, of higher education in England following the report of the committee chaired by Lord Browne on student fees and funding in October 2010 and the publication of the White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System in June 2011 (Browne report, 2010, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). However the two contexts are not the same. There are generic issues – tensions, challenges and opportunities – that apply to all advanced higher education systems; and there are specific issues – dilemmas and controversies – arising from the Government's proposals that apply to higher education in England (not even Scotland and Wales). It is a mistake to conflate the two – and, in particular, to adopt an Anglocentric approach by imagining that the specific circumstances in which English universities and colleges find themselves at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century have a universal application. It is also a mistake to imagine that, even if the particular circumstances of English higher education are to some degree exceptional, the broad policy directions – for example, towards higher student fees and greater competition between institutions – do have a wider application, and that this neoliberal road is one that all higher education systems will have to follow, more or less willingly.

This mistake is often made because the generic conditions of higher education systems are viewed through the lens of the specific circumstances of Government policies for higher education (and the adjustments in the management of higher education institutions to which these policies give rise) rather than these circumstances being seen as an aspect of these general conditions. As a result not only are secondary and derivative (and often ephemeral) policies and management practices given an exaggerated emphasis; there is also a temptation to regard the future of higher education as closed off, already fixed by an inexorable flow of ideological determinism, rather than open, in the sense that underlying structural conditions allow for a

range of possible 'futures'. In contrast, if the future of higher education is viewed against the background of these underlying structural conditions, the effect can well be to dissolve the apparent certainties of specific higher education policies. These policies are then seen as potentially having a range of outcomes in addition to their political 'sponsor's' proclaimed intentions – not simply because policy-making is (to say the least) a crude and inexact science, or even because there will always be unintended and unanticipated consequences, but also because of the influence of these framing conditions, both *longue durée* and creativity and potential.

This (lecture/paper) is divided into two sections. The first, inevitably, considers the particular circumstances in which English higher education finds itself. It offers an analysis of the recommendations made in the Browne report as modified by the Government (both immediately on the publication of the Browne report and subsequently in the White Paper), and also suggests a range of scenarios of what might happen in the short to medium term. The second section considers the general conditions to which all higher education systems, including the English system, are subject – some of which are well recognised, such as the impact of a global knowledge-led economy; and others which are perhaps less familiar, such as the emergence of a 'graduate' society (and culture) with wide-ranging implications for social and cultural modes.

Browne Report and White Paper – three 'stories'

There are three 'stories' to describe the impact and significance of the Browne report, the White Paper and the subsequent tinkering/fine-tuning of the Government's higher education policy:

i) The first 'story' is about the death of public higher education. The core argument is that the carefully crafted 'post-war' settlement of higher education associated, above all, with the Robbins committee's endorsement of expansion and the consolidation of a system of arm's-length public funding of institutions (combined with generous arrangements for student support) is now under threat. It is further argued that also under threat are 'academic' values, variously described as respect for the civilising effects of the humanities, the critical potential of the social sciences, the independence of the natural sciences and the integrity of professional education; and also 'social' values, such as a commitment to widening participation and

community engagement or simply the wider status of universities as independent institutions within civil society.

ii) The second 'story' is, in effect, a repudiation of the first. According to this argument the 'post-war' settlement was never intended to be fixed, and has already been substantially modified. In practice arm's-length funding has been compromised by the sheer size, and cost, of the system. The ending of the binary system twenty years ago produced a pronounced tilt towards the vocational. Far from curbing growth, the proposals for higher fees in the Browne report and endorsed by the White Paper provide higher institutions with additional resources – and also an incentive to maintain current levels of participation. Through fees, higher education has been shielded from the worse effects of the Government's cruel-but-necessary deficit reduction programme. In other words Browne (established, of course, by the previous Labour Government) and the White Paper represent an evolutionary response, emphasising policy continuity rather than ideological rupture.

iii) The third 'story' is the Government's proposals were ill-prepared. In their original form they could never have worked – politically or in practice. The result has been a number uncoordinated 'adjustments', the most important of which happened on the very day the Browne report was published, when the Government rejected the key recommendation that there should be no cap on the maximum fee that institutions would be allowed to charge. This has been followed by other important adjustments. Perhaps the most significant are the re-invention of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as the 'lead' regulator, opening up the prospect of an even more intrusive control regime (nationalisation-by-the-back-door); and the re-imposition of student number controls that are a variance with the fundamental principles of a 'market' system (but which, nevertheless, are essential to control overall public expenditure exposure). More 'adjustments' are inevitable as the Government's proposals are implemented in real time and in real institutions. In addition, of course, the responses of institutions – individually, in aggregate and collectively – add new levels of uncertainty and introduce a heightened element of randomness. In other words – a slow-motion car crash in terms of public policy.

Each of 'stories' has its advocates. The National Union of Students (NUS), ungrateful that students are now to be placed 'at the heart' of the system, has been prominent among those who have rallied to protect the idea of the 'public university'. Not surprisingly perhaps, the University and College Union (UCU) has taken a similar line, although it has been criticised for simply defending the status quo. Some commentators have drawn attention to the re-emergence of an older strain of ideology – Kingsley Amis' cry of 'more means worse', and the attacks on university expansion (and all progressive education movements) in the Black Papers of the 1970s. Most interesting perhaps has been the role of 'public intellectuals'. Usually slow to be roused by events in their own academic backyard, they too have rallied to the cause. Not only has the London Review of Books published a series of excellent polemics – by Stefan Collini (Cambridge) and Harold Hotson (Oxford), the present 'crisis' in English higher education has even made the pages of the New York Review of Books in articles by Simon Head (also Oxford) (Collini, 2010 and 2011, Hotson, 2011, Head, 2011). The prominence of academics from Oxbridge, and the public condemnation of the Government's proposals by several 'Russell Group' universities (the very institutions with most perhaps to gain – but also the strongest upholders of the traditional idea of a university), are evidence of the widespread endorsement of the first 'story'.

The advocates of the second 'story' include the bulk of the higher education 'establishment' – most vice chancellors, certainly as represented by Universities UK (Universities UK, 2011), probably the majority of lay members of Councils and Governing Bodies, most policy think-tanks (which are either enthusiastic supporters of the Government's proposals or caught up in the excitement of implementing these proposals), management consultants (who see a market opportunity) and policy agencies which have no choice but to accept these proposals whatever their private reservations. The general attitude of advocates of the second 'story' is a mixture of acceptance of the 'cruel necessity' of higher fees and of a reluctance to be seen as (re)acting 'politically'.

Advocates of the third 'story', a slow-motion car crash, tend to be drawn from those who accept the essence of the first 'story', the threat to the idea of the 'public university' and all it represents, but occupy roles that force them to engage with the implementation of the Government's proposals; and those who broadly agree with the second 'story', there-is-no-alternative, but have become increasingly concerned by the workability of the whole package as 'adjustments'

have accumulated. It is perhaps unfair to place HEFCE among those who broadly endorse this third 'story'. Initially largely excluded (and therefore highly critical – in private), HEFCE has now moved back centre-stage in the implementation phase – presumably on the principle that in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2011).

Whatever happens in the next stages of implementation – and it is difficult to believe that the Browne-White Paper regime will offer such an enduring settlement as that represented by the Robbins report almost half a century ago – some elements have now become clear:

i) The Government's refusal to lift the cap on fees entirely (as the Browne committee had recommended, albeit with the addition of an ingenious taper which would have led to the proceeds of high fees being 'taxed') has probably made it difficult if impossible for a true market to develop in English higher education;

ii) What has emerged instead is closer to a system of student vouchers repayable as a graduate tax over twenty years – by most graduates, although a substantial minority (forty per cent overall, and sixty per cent of women graduates) will never pay back the full amount, according to the most reliable calculations;

iii) Two consequences flow from the architecture of this funding system. First, there continues to be substantial (even higher) exposure in terms of public expenditure which, whatever its eventual accounting treatment, must be funded in the first place (probably extending to the medium term). Secondly, because a significant minority of graduates are unlikely to pay back the full amount, they have no interest in keeping fees low; indeed higher fees may be to their advantage because they will benefit from higher funding;

iv) The need to cap public expenditure exposure has led to the imposition of an overall student number cap – with two quasi-exceptions. The first is that institutions will be free to recruit as many students with AAB (or above) grades as A level, in order to signal the Government's approval of high-achieving students. The second is that institutions charging on average £7.5K or less will be free to compete for a limited number of 'extra' students, to exercise downward pressure on fee levels to please the Treasury;

v) Most institutions have set their initial fee levels in the context of making 'positioning' statements, i.e. £9K to indicate world-class status/aspirations and £8.5K to indicate their 'social conscience'. Fee levels have not been based on robust analyses of supply and demand, or costs of provision. Although these levels are likely to be maintained as 'headline' fees, significant exceptions/adjustments are likely to be made;

vi) Finally, despite (naïve?) expectations that HEFCE (and other control agencies) would have their responsibilities radically curtailed (if they did not face outright abolition), regulation has already made a powerful comeback. As has already been said, HEFCE is to become the 'lead' regulator for English higher education. It is possible that the powers of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) may be increased. Although nudged towards adopting a risk-based (and lighter touch?) system of quality assurance, the Quality Assurance Agency is also likely to gain additional leverage as new providers enter the higher education market.

Six scenarios

All three 'stories' about the Government's proposals to introduce (much) higher fees and to stimulate greater competition between institutions, both measures designed ostensibly to promote the development of a market in English higher education, are plausible. It is true that these proposals amount to a concerted attack on the idea of higher education as a 'public service' and the idea that individual universities are autonomous institutions inhabiting the crucial civil society space between the State and the market-place. It is also true that, in the light of the higher policies being pursued by the previous Labour Government (in particular, its introduction of student fees, initially at a modest level following the 1999 Dearing report and subsequently at a much higher level while Charles Clarke was Secretary of State), and in the light of the new Government's conviction that its overriding responsibility was to curb the deficit in public finances, there was little alternative to proposals approximating to those made in the Browne report and the White Paper. It is also true that these proposals were not properly thought through, both in terms of their unanticipated or unintended consequences (always difficult but not generally regarded as impossible to identify in the present age of risk assessment) and in terms of the details of their implementation (which should have been much easier to anticipate). So any summary of the intentions and impact of the Government's proposals must

include elements of all three 'stories' – the attack on the public university, cruel necessity/there-is-no-alternative (plus continuity with previous policy), and the slow-motion car crash.

Also the features of the Government's package which have emerged – the absence of a true fees market; its effective replacement by system of student vouchers repayable as a graduate tax (by some); the continuing high level of public expenditure exposure (and consequently need to maintain tight student number controls); the naivety perhaps of institutions in using fee-levels to make 'positioning' statements not rooted in robust business planning; and the emergence of a new control regime based on regulation rather than funding levers – are sufficiently inconsistent to make forecasting the future direction of English higher education difficult. For that reason the best approach perhaps is to envisage a range of different scenarios:

1. A first scenario is that, indeed, if the paradigm shift announced by Lord Browne, comes to pass. Not only does a lively market in fees develop among existing higher education institutions, but private providers flood in – some for-profit companies specialising in course delivery, others multinational media corporations with entirely new delivery models; and others again non-UK higher education institutions attracted by a more open (and potentially lucrative?) market place. Meanwhile Further Education colleges become much more significant providers both of entry-level higher education (rather on the US community college pattern) and of new vocational pathways (in a rerun of the binary policy of the 1960s);

2. But a second scenario is that higher fees consolidate the position of higher status institutions – because fees may actually provide a more secure – and more generous – stream of funding still underwritten by the State than under the current HEFCE grant system. On the other hand, higher fees force other universities to abandon-me-too strategies of 'academic drift' (especially in terms of building research capacity) and adopt strategies that are dictated more by the demands of students and needs of employers. So, although an elite core remains 'above the market', the bulk of institutions are transformed by differential fees. Despite the apparent uniformity of headline fees, widespread discounting, more or less generous bursaries and other market devices produce real differentiation;

3. According to a third scenario, the current 'reform' produces unexpected 'winners' and 'losers'. Success in the fees market depends not only on the capacity to charge higher fees but also the ability to recruit sufficient students, whatever the fees. So an institution's place in the 'pecking order' (and its academic standing – which are not necessarily the same, although they are confused in a system obsessed with brands and league tables) is not the only success factor. Equally decisive are subject mix (a substantial stake in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects would be an asset – or would it?), geography (often at the level of micro-regions), financial resilience and management capacity;

4. A fourth scenario opens up the possibility of more radical restructuring than has been seen since the 1960s (when, broadly, the current pattern of institutions was established – half a century ago!). Some institutions struggle to maintain their independence. The attitude of Ministers (and, through their influence, the attitude of HEFCE) to institutional failures is difficult to predict – especially if they are the 'wrong' losers (in academic or political terms). Every university is in an individual Member of Parliament's constituency – and, therefore, a 'special case'. At a less catastrophist level experience of, and appetite for collaborations and partnerships, becomes much more important (even, or especially, those that cross boundaries – between HE and FE, public and private or national and international);

5. A fifth scenario takes a broader view, embracing not just the fees and funding changes developed from the Browne report and the spending review but wider policies (for example, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) or new regulations on student visas). Successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) have failed to promote research concentration; indeed more differential 'gearing' of research funding allocation systems has been needed to override their results that have actually demonstrated how widespread research excellence is among all kinds of institutions (although clumped in large research-intensive universities). There is little evidence that the REF will be more effective in this respect; the attempt to assess 'impact' could even produce the reverse effect. At a minimum this will introduce new uncertainties because the outcomes of the REF may be more difficult to 'call' than those of past RAEs. The new visa regulations also handicap those institutions that attempt to escape from the constraints of national policies (or overcome their weaknesses in domestic markets) by 'international flight'. These are just two examples of the potential significant impact of 'non-Browne' policies;

6. The sixth scenario is that the model of modernisation of higher education adopted in England proves to be the exception, a policy cul-de-sac rather than a standard-bearer for reforms that other nations in the UK (and outside) will be obliged to adopt. It is important to recognise that the reform process from the Browne report to the White Paper has been the first conducted within the context of devolution. The Robbins report in 1963, in effect, considered the whole of UK higher education because universities were then the responsibility of the UK Government (in practice, the English Department of Education and Science). The Dearing report also provided a UK-wide perspective, through the medium of a related Scottish enquiry chaired by Andrew Cubie. It is equally important to recognise that parallel reform initiatives in other nations of the UK, and also in Ireland, have placed much greater emphasis on the need to 'steer' higher education, and placed much less faith in the benefits of establishing a market. Indeed the White Paper itself represents an uneasy compromise between the 'steering' and 'market' views of the future direction of higher education policy, having rejected the unvarnished market system recommended by the Browne report;

7. In the final scenario the higher education system demonstrates its underlying resilience by 'absorbing' the impact of the current reforms with minimum change. Fee cartels emerge through a process of osmosis that is immune to effective scrutiny by fair competition regulators. Most students, however loud their collective protests, have little choice but to pay higher fees (and, because they may never have to pay back the full amount, many even welcome higher fees because they give institutions more money to meet student demands in the here and now). Even those institutions most exposed by a high-fee regime develop effective coping strategies. They also tend to be the most 'streetwise' institutions, used to searching out new student markets to compensate for declining or lost markets. New providers, whether private institutions or Further Education colleges, are just as likely to seek alliances with existing higher education institutions as to compete with them head-on; indeed more integrated higher education provision would be in the best interests of students.

Although it is difficult at this stage to speculate which of these seven scenarios will turn out to be closest to what actually happens to English higher education, experience suggests all will in some sense and to

different degrees prove to be accurate (and maybe some other scenarios that have not been discussed here). Certainly the last one cannot be discounted. It is worth recalling Tancredi's cynical (or perhaps idealistic?) comment in *The Leopard* with regard to the unification of Italy in the 1860s that 'things must change so that things can stay the same' (di Lampedusa, 1960, p40). The difficulty with forecasting the future lies not simply with the impracticality of some of the proposals made in the White Paper that has necessitated (and will continue to necessitate) frequent policy 'adjustments'. The difficulty lies also with the 'unknowns'; the most immediate and important the impact of higher fees on student demand (will the almost inevitable dip be shallow and brief as it was when Charles Clarke raised fees – or will it be deep and sustained?). The difficulty with forecasting also lies with the perverse effects and unintended consequences. Good examples are the deeper message that will be sent by the withdrawal of all direct public support for the arts, humanities and social sciences, even if potential funding for these subjects is actually increased, and the longer-term impact of devolution (will Scotland and Wales be forced to go down the English road, or will the emerging English market model have to be modified to take account of the wider UK environment, especially if Scotland advances closer to de facto independence?). The former US Secretary of State for Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was widely satirised for distinguishing between 'knowns', 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'; in fact, his comment was a penetrating observations on the perils of public policy making (Rumsfeld, 2002).

Modern higher education systems – and the *longue durée*

The subject of the second section of this (lecture/paper) is the deeper structural forces that shape all modern higher education systems. Of course, there is danger of falling into a deterministic, or structuralist, trap and imagining that the 'base' is all and the 'superstructure' nothing; path dependency is important, whether it takes the form of the politically mandatory emphasis on the 'social dimension' of higher education in the rest of Europe or the particular 'path' towards a market in higher education that has chosen here in England (and which began under New Labour). Nevertheless, the contrast drawn by the French historian, Fernand Braudel, between the 'history of events' (*histoire événementielle*) and the 'long haul' (*longue durée*) offers an interesting frame of reference. It is these more fundamental structural changes – in science and society, in organisations and culture – that will shape the future of higher education as much as, or more than, political events such as the Browne report or the White Paper. Three key drivers of the development of modern higher education systems

will be discussed in this second section – the knowledge economy, the graduate society, and ‘world’ cultures.

Knowledge economy

The basic contours of the knowledge economy are well known. The first is the inexorable year-on-year decline in low-skill jobs. This is a well-established trend across the developed world. But, increasingly and significantly, it can also be observed in the developing world; low-wage jobs should be confused with, or equated to, low-skill jobs. This decline has been accompanied by an alarming growth in an underclass of the economically, socially, culturally and globally marginal. Low-skill jobs have been replaced by two different kinds of jobs (which may nevertheless overlap). The first kind of replacement job is high-skill jobs, the great majority of which are also graduate jobs (and, more and more, jobs that require postgraduate not just undergraduate qualifications). But there is a second kind of replacement job that is much more interesting and less well understood. These are high-status jobs in the spreading ‘services’ sector (both private and public), in professional services, in media and design, in consultancy, in the so-called ‘commentariat’ – and, of course, in higher education itself. But these are not high-skill jobs as judged by traditional criteria of professional expertise; or the skills they require are ‘soft’ rather than ‘hard’. Perhaps a new Max Weber is needed to describe the emergence of this ‘new class’. Not only are many graduate jobs to found in this ‘new class’, but it is also perhaps the decisive class in forming so-called ‘public opinion’ by virtue of their articulacy (a product of their experience of higher education) and, more concretely, their control of the levers of media power. The world is seen increasingly through the eyes of this ‘new class’.

Secondly, in the knowledge economy there are important changes in how knowledge is defined and produced – with direct impacts on university research. There are several different ways of thinking about these changes in knowledge production. An influential example is the idea of the ‘triple helix’ of university, economy and government (which some people would like to extend to a ‘quadruple helix’ by adding culture) (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2005). An alternative account is the idea of ‘Mode 2’ knowledge – in other words, transdisciplinary, contextualised, problem-solving, applications-oriented knowledge which is not superseding but complementing more conventional forms of research labelled ‘Mode 1’ (Gibbons et al, 1994 , Nowotny, Scott and

Gibbons, 2001). This second account attempts to describe the way that science (or knowledge) is now deeply embedded in society in many different ways – innovation strategies, diverse and distributed personnel, reflective practice, feedback loops often fuelled by political activism and so on. But it does not adopt a crude social constructivist position, and acknowledges the existence of scientific laws and the significance of empirical evidence. The key idea, shared with the 'triple helix', is that knowledge production is not linear but multidirectional and reflexive, even in the hardest of 'hard' sciences'.

The third contour of the knowledge economy is the rising tide of data and information and of the new communication technologies to 'manage' these massive data flows. Once again, this is not always what it seems. One aspect is the rise of automated data systems, used every day by almost everyone, that also created critical dependencies, and acute risks as the growing frequency of stories about 'cyber attacks' so clearly demonstrate. Even (or perhaps especially) when these data systems work according to plan, they represent degrees of social control and surveillance, the implications of which have yet to be adequately reconciled with civil liberties and democratic politics. These systems are also, quintessentially, 'expert' systems in which technological competences are deeply embedded and therefore 'hidden' from all but the technical elite. Another feature of this 'information world' is our often naive enthusiasm for blogs and tweets without reflecting on their far-reaching consequences. Perhaps this is not surprising because 'reflection' is not a quality much valued in 'information world'. Blogs and tweets create false intimacies. In an academic context the gulf between the thought rhythms required to write a well-crafted essay and those needed to construct a 140-character tweet presents a major challenge. But, whatever answers are offered, the construction of this new 'information world' demonstrates how the original idea of the 'knowledge economy' as a kind of rational-scientific-high tech nirvana has been overlaid, or even superseded, by more unfamiliar conceptions.

Graduate society / culture

The second fundamental driver of the development of modern higher education systems is the emergence of a graduate society (and graduate culture). Again the basic idea is fairly simple. Historically social identity was heavily influenced, although not absolutely determined, by 'objective' factors such as social class, gender, religion and ethnicity. It was, relatively, stable and, to a significant extent, fixed. But with the advance of formal education and credentials identity

came to be determined more and more by levels of educational attainment. To take a simple example (but an illuminating one because this has been among the most powerful drivers of mass higher education), at some stage in the past generation in most developed countries it became impossible to maintain a middle class identity, a bourgeois lifestyle, without being a graduate; even in poorer countries, the demand for higher education is driven by a similar search for identity and status. Conventionally this can be described, and explained, in terms of the accumulation of cultural capital.

But funny things are happening to cultural capital – as they are to technical expertise. Just as key elements of technical expertise have been subcontracted to small groups of ultra experts who manage expert systems on behalf of the wider society (and economy), so cultural capital no longer implies access to, and command of, 'high culture' or affiliation to liberal, secular, rational, scientific norms. Instead it has been diluted – and maybe equates to not much more than enjoyment of a 'lifestyle'. Of course, this graduate 'lifestyle' should not be belittled – graduates are more likely to vote and generally participate in society; they enjoy better health; and they are more law-abiding (Bynner and Egerton, 2001). Nor is it any longer the responsibility of mass higher education systems to reproduce traditional elites. Also the expansion of higher education has played a key role in changing gender relations, perhaps the most decisive social transformation of our age.

It is important to recognise the suggestive links between this graduate 'lifestyle' and the 'new class' of individuals in high-status (rather than high-skill) jobs, in which mass higher education systems have played an equally significant role. The American scholar Richard Florida has put the best possible 'spin' on all this by emphasising the synergies between life-styles, cultural creativity and entrepreneurship in his work on 'clever cities' (almost invariably university cities) (Florida, 2004). However, these new articulations between mass higher education and social identity, and social roles, can be expressed in less positive terms. Maybe our collective inability, or reluctance, to understand and acknowledge these new connections fuels the complaints of conservatives about 'more means worse' – an agenda that, however illogically, feeds the drive to subject universities to the 'market'. Perhaps there is a need to speak plainly – mass higher education systems have created their own social realities; unlike the elite

university systems of the past they are no longer part of a supply chain for the production of elites and experts.

'World' cultures

The third driver of the development of the modern university is the growth of 'world' cultures. Once again, this is a more complex evolution that at first appears. The conventional discourse is of the spread of global (i.e. US or European) 'brands'; of the imposition of a neoliberal economic (and geo-political?) world order so graphically expressed in the visual landscape of the modern city with its gleaming towers of capitalism, gated communities and prestige infrastructure; of the so-called 'Coca-Cola-isation' of the twenty-first century world. The modern university is seen as deeply implicated in promoting this vision of 'world' culture. Routine and detailed strategies for internationalisation all tend to this glorious (or inglorious?) end. This view, and these strategies, occasionally encounter obstacles and setbacks – for example, the blow-back of (largely Islamic) fundamentalism, a proliferation of 'small' wars or the persistence of poverty and disease. But they are seen as temporary disturbances; democratic capitalism marches on as the hegemonic, perhaps only, vision of globalisation.

However, there are other discourses. One is of 'globalisation', a clumsy word used to describe how global cultures and local environments interact. Another is of hybridisation, a term that describes the immensely creative interchange between 'metropolitan' and 'peripheral' cultures. A third discourse, of course, is of outright resistance (especially significant in the arena of technology, because the same technologies are available to all without much distinction). Viewed through these different lenses, the internationalisation strategies of UK universities (and universities from other developed countries) take on a different light. In particular this raises important questions about the connections between massification at home and internationalisation abroad. Are massification and internationalisation different aspects of the same general phenomenon, the opening-up of higher education? Or is internationalisation an opposed trend, either as an escape from the consequences of mass higher education for elite universities (who can retreat into their global league tables) or as agents in a post-imperial enterprise.

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief discussion of these three building blocks of the 'context' within which mass higher education systems must operate? The first, not very helpful, conclusion is that the links between these systems and the 'knowledge economy', the

emerging graduate society and 'world' cultures are highly complex. Things are much less straightforward than they appear. The implication, of course, is that policy agendas which are familiar currency – such as the skills agenda, or the social inclusion agenda, or the employability agenda, or the 'respect' agenda (in relation to Islamic fundamentalism) or the 'impact' agenda (with regard to the REF) – are all built on fragile conceptual foundations, naive assumptions, if not outright misunderstandings of how mass higher education systems relate to economic and social structures. But there is a second, more suggestive, conclusion that therefore is less easy to express. It is that maybe the idea of 'context' itself is misleading because it suggests that it is easy to distinguish between what is 'inside' and what is 'outside' higher education, or to define causal links. In the contemporary world mass higher education systems can no longer be clearly demarcated from other systems – the economy, social structures, culture. Just as they create their own social realities, they may also generate new economic arrangements and create their own cultures.

Most of the really fundamental changes in higher education reflect these kinds of changes – such as:

- The growth of the system, much of it very recent: today there are 2.5 million students compared with 1.5 million at the time of the Dearing report 12 years ago. It was only really in the years of New Labour that the UK moved decisively – and irreversibly? – towards a system of truly mass higher education. This decisive shift has tended to be masked by the persistence of many features more characteristic of an elite university system (for example, low wastage);
- Changes in the pattern of courses. Among the most significant the creeping 'vocationalisation' of most university courses. This is apparent in terms of the increasing popularity of directly vocational courses; the two largest blocs in the modern university are business and management, and professions allied to medicine (which is hardly surprising given that business and health are probably the two most important sectors – or hence policy preoccupations – in twenty-first century Britain). This drift to vocationalism is also apparent in the growing emphasis on employability; modules on employability skills are now included in most courses, even the most traditionally academic. This, of course, is the exact opposite of 'academic drift', or the former

polytechnics' alleged abandonment of their roots in professional and vocational education;

- There have also been key changes in teaching – and learning. A decade ago the emphasis was on top-down Information technology (IT)-enabled 'learning management systems'; today, of course, that emphasis has switched to the bottom-up 'social media'. But there is even more going. There is also a cluster of wider trends – ranging from the growth of plagiarism to the introduction of the National Student Survey – which are part of a revolution in student culture;
- New patterns of research production have also been developed. This is apparent in a number of ways – first, the development of theories of 'Mode 2' knowledge and the 'Triple Helix', which have already been discussed; secondly, the 'industrialisation' of research practice; thirdly, increasing systems of surveillance (or, to adopt more neutral terminology, assessment and accountability!); fourthly, the much strengthened management of the research enterprise (and its closer links with 'enterprise' in the sense it is used for the Higher Education Innovation Fund); fifthly, the rise of collective and collaborative research (and the eclipse of more individual scholarship?); and finally, the bifurcation of research and more generalist academic careers;
- Finally, equally far-reaching changes have taken place in universities as organisations – and, more specifically, their leadership, governance and management. The 'donnish dominion' is now a distant memory, even in the most traditional and research intensive universities. The rise of the managers, academic and professional, is an accomplished fact.

These fundamental changes in the constitution of the modern university are often seen as imposed, the result of university leaders succumbing to external pressures. In some senses this is true. The increasing burden of accountability cannot be denied. Universities, like many other organisations, are in the grip of a compliance culture which has been attributed to wider phenomena such as the growth of a regulatory State and of a so-called 'audit society'. But that is only part of the story. These changes are also the result of the dynamics of the development of mass higher education, of a global knowledge economy and of a new kind of society in which a higher education has become a prerequisite of social status (and cultural worth); they are coming from 'inside' or from the 'far outside' (of social, economic and cultural

transformation) as much, or more than, from the 'near outside' (of political events and, more specifically, White Papers on higher education). This can be regarded as a source of comfort – for two reasons. The first is that there is perhaps less need to agonise, and agitate, about the Browne report and its aftershocks. Also the combination of privatisation and nationalisation currently being inflicted upon English higher education, which seems bizarre and contradictory in terms of the 'history of events', becomes much more comprehensible in the context of the 'long haul'. The second reason is that it underlines the urgent need to bring social scientific knowledge – theories, public policy and professional insights and empirical research – to bear on understanding modern higher education systems. That is where its, and our, future will be discovered not in the entrails of David Willetts!

Conclusion

And yet... Political events do matter. They matter in the short term which, it should be remembered, is the only term for many students and a significant proportion of staff in higher education. They matter too because the future is determined by the slow accretion of political events as much as by the accumulation of fundamental social, economic and cultural change. So nothing in the analysis offered in this (lecture/paper) can be used as an excuse for not engaging political debate about the future of higher education. The principle of 'public' higher education – public not necessarily (although desirably) in terms of its funding; but public in the sense that higher education, both teaching and research, must transcend the purely personal, extend beyond the individual and reach out in the future, imagined and unimaginable – deserves to be defended. First, any weakening of that idea is certain to undermine higher education as a progressive social project – not just at the margin in terms of 'widening participation' but centrally in terms of the quality of our democracy, the conditions of our social life. Secondly, any weakening of the idea of 'public' higher education will compromise the university's key position in 'civil society', that crucial space between the State or the market and the purely personal domain. Not only does the idea of 'civil society', inevitably, imply collective actions and instincts; it is also in the space afforded by 'civil society' in which criticality – and, therefore, academic (and other) freedom – flourish. But neither should the moral potential of the State – the *res publica* or, to give its old English name, the 'Common Wealth' – be denied. Finally, any weakening of the idea of 'public' higher education is a challenge to science itself – because the 'marketisation'

of higher education, especially of research, is incompatible with fundamental processes of 'open' science on which its continuing progress ultimately depends.

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