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Commentaries

The audit and accountability culture in UK universities: time to strike back?

In the 2002 Reith lectures on "A Question of Trust", Onora O'Neill discussed the decline of trust in contemporary society and its replacement by a culture of audit and accountability.(1) We are, she says, subject to legislation, regulation, and controls that

> "... require detailed conformity to procedures and protocols, detailed record keeping and provision of information in specified formats and success in reaching targets."

Furthermore, there are 'sharp teeth' associated with such auditing and accountability procedures. The data collected are collated into performance indicators, league tables are compiled, and rewards/sanctions distributed according to one's league position or performance against a target. All this is done in the rhetoric of accountability, the new mantra for the delivery of better public services—including universities and their research—and for the most beneficial investment of public money.

Like all academics, I have been at the receiving end of some of these requirements not just for general information, but for carefully quantified information, on which audit and other reports can be based, publicly available information—including league tables—can be constructed, and decisions made regarding the investment of public money. In general, I am pro-quantification—when the data are worth having and the issues being surveyed are quantifiable—but two recent requests to fill in questionnaires have quickly led me to Onora O'Neill's position, and two brusque responses.

In the first, as part of the University of Bristol's contribution to what is known as the Universities' 'Transparency Review' [sic] I was asked—as a member of one of the departments currently being surveyed—to fill in a form on-line (although the system didn't work, so an administrator offered to do it for me!) In this, I had to indicate—in late April 2002—the percentage allocation of my time during the period 1 December 2001 – 31 March 2002. Ten categories were on offer (table 1, over).

I declined to respond, for two main reasons. The first was that, even if the exercise was in every other sense feasible, I have no way of remembering or reconstructing my time allocation over such a long period in the past: any figures that I gave would have been nothing but guesswork, and entirely worthless. The second was that, even if I had been informed before the period started, and asked to keep a diary or other record of my time use, I couldn't have done so using the categories provided. They overlap so much that I have no idea how I would allocate some of the time I know I spent—where, for example, would I place reading a book on a train journey (does that count as part of my working time?!), which was in my research field (for which I have a grant application pending), and covered a topic that I sometimes teach!

I understand that this Transparency Review is part of a national programme devised within the university sector in order to convince our paymasters that we are using our time in the ways for which we are funded—although there was no category for filling in bad questionnaires (is this support?—and if so, of what?)! It is hard to believe that academics both contributed to the design of this instrument and then agreed to impose it on their colleagues, though I understand this was the case. I have declined to participate: several of my colleagues tell me that they found it less hassle to do so than to refuse, so they invented figures. Result: data of no value at all.

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(1) The lectures can be found at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/

Table 1. The categories for time allocation in the University of Bristol Transparency Review.

Job Title Professor of Geography

- Teaching
  - publicly funded
  - non-publicly funded
- Research
  - own funded
  - externally publicly funded
  - externally non-publicly funded
- Other
  - other services
  - other—clinical services
- Support
  - teaching
  - research
  - other

The second request came from the Chairman of the recently formed Academy for the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences. It was sent to me as the coeditor of this academic journal. (Colleagues who edit other journals tell me they have received it too.) There was a covering e-mail setting the context (table 2), and then a questionnaire (table 3).

Once again I declined to answer, in the following terms.

> "I'm afraid I find such questions virtually unanswerable. Any percentages that I cited would be no more than vague guesses, not worth the ether that this message flows down!"

I'm not going to take up much space here defending that response—and thus the view that the originators of the questionnaire may have of *Environment and Planning A*. I find most of the questions, and the concepts that underlie them, so vague and indeterminate that I couldn't give valid answers. How can you know research is paradigm-shifting until the shift has occurred—which may take several years? How can I separate out my excitements from those of the wide range of readers we seek to serve in *Environment and Planning A*? And why should cutting-edge research—assuming that I could recognise it when I saw it!—be more worthy of support than 'normal science'?

Table 2. The second request.

Re: Review and Identification of Current and Evolving Research in Leading Social Science Journals.

The academy is preparing a report for the ESRC's Research Priorities Board on the cutting edge research that appears in leading social science journals. Specifically, they want to know about any developments which would be worthy of funding. For example, they are interested in innovations in advanced methodologies, and work that is shifting paradigms.

Your journal has been identified as one of the main outlets for UK research in your discipline. As its Editor, you will be familiar with the range of research output that comes across your desk. I would therefore be grateful for your views on any significant innovations and developments published in *Environment and Planning A* within the last several years. In order to expedite the process, I am attaching a questionnaire. Your assistance with this would be greatly appreciated. I have kept the questionnaire short, in the hope that this will allow you to complete and return it within five days of receipt. The Priorities Board hopes to have the report before them at their next meeting in the middle of May, when they will be drawing up a list of new priority topics for research in the coming years.

Thank you for your co-operation. I look forward to receiving your reply.

Table 3. The questionnaire.

Questionnaire on Current and Evolving Research

As Editor of one of the main UK outlets for research in your discipline, a great deal of material crosses your desk. The following questions ask you to identify and specify the research that you see from across the discipline that is, in some sense, 'cutting edge'. For the purposes of this investigation, cutting edge refers to current and evolving research that has excited your interest, and warrants the support of social science funding agencies.

All answers will be aggregated with the views of other editors. No journal or respondent will be identified or identifiable in the results of this survey.

1. In general terms, what percentage of work you see as Editor would you regard as cutting edge?
2. Cutting edge research comes in a variety of forms. Below are some ways of characterising such research. They are intended to encourage you to think of work that you have found exciting and valuable. Please identify specific research that qualifies as cutting edge under these headings:
   a) significant innovation in advanced methodologies
   b) paradigm-shifting work
   c) development of a new sub-area
   d) creatively inter- or multi-disciplinary
   e) exciting to leading researchers (please be specific about the cause of excitement)
   f) other research that is cutting edge (please explain why)

Thinking in more general terms about cutting edge research, it is interesting to reflect that, up until about five years ago, *globalisation*, *feminism/gender studies*, and *postmodernism* were regarded as important sources of new and exciting research in the social sciences. These three orientations resonate differently across the disciplines and do not include all the important sources, of course, but serve to introduce the first set of questions about the large themes that inform research output.

3. What percentage of cutting edge research is still done under the following broad headings?
   a) globalisation
   b) gender
   c) postmodernism
4. Please specify the cutting edge research that you have seen under these headings
   a) globalisation
   b) gender
   c) postmodernism
5. What new themes/approaches are emerging?
6. What are the exciting methodological innovations?
7. Does cutting edge research exhibit particular characteristics? Can you list these?
8. Can you identify any areas of cutting edge research that need special encouragement? Can you say why it is needed?
9. Please add any other comments here.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

To me, such questionnaires are not only a waste of time, they are dangerous. Some will presumably answer, though I have been pleased to find that all other editors that I have spoken to just ignored the request (clearly I have too much time to spare getting heated about such things!) Data will be collated and a report will go forward on which the ESRC might act. It will all be spurious, an attempt to quantify the unquantifiable: bad social science will be used to promote particular work within the social sciences based on bad information—in effect, I guess, little more than the personal preferences (or prejudices?!) of a few editors.

I recall when I was at the University of Essex that David Rose, at the time Acting Director of the ESRC Research Centre that was launching the British Household Panel Study (BHPS), was having to fight a strong rearguard action defending his view—rightly held I believed—that the design of a questionnaire (including many piloting stages) was research, just as worthy of support and status in the creation of new knowledge as many other activities supported by the ESRC. Visiting panels, RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) panels, and others just wanted to see 'outputs'—published papers in refereed journals. Fortunately their narrow views didn't prevail: David's did, and we now have what is very widely recognised as a 'Rolls Royce' of survey instruments in the BHPS.

Too often, it seems, questionnaires are dashed off with insufficient thought to the details of their preparation and prior testing. I recently agreed to participate in a year-long survey run from a university medical school. Some of the questions were, to me, unanswerable—some even ludicrous. I was asked, for example, if—at the age of 60—I expected my health to decline over the next few years: I could think of only one answer—yes; since the alternative was even worse! And I was asked if I would recommend a prescription drug that I was using to others—to which I responded no, which will undoubtedly be interpreted as a lack of confidence in the drug, not that I had no intention of replacing a doctor! When I queried these, and several other, questions, I was told that they were standard questions taken from other survey instruments. Bad practice was being diffused by bad practitioners, because, to be generous, they had insufficient time—and, I guess, experience and expertise—to question and test the instrument properly, and then try to replace it by something better!

Of course, we can readily produce excuses for such practices. There is an apparent insatiable demand for quantified data, on which to base policy and then to show that the policy has succeeded. And so we succumb. We hastily produce poor instruments; we reply to (some of) the questionnaires; and spurious 'data' are presented as 'facts'. Information is created on which trust can be based and which will be published and circulated: as Onora O'Neill argued, "It seems no information about institutions and professions is too boring or too routine to remain unpublished"—to which I would add, and 'too spurious and misleading'.

Noel Castree (2002) recently argued that one of the tasks for critical geographers—and I'm sure he would have no problem in that being extended to 'critical social scientists' more generally—is to put our own houses in order, to challenge and change the bad practices that characterise our universities, learned societies, and other institutions as they bend the knee to the 'audit and accountability culture'. I have made my small contribution in one single week of April 2002 by declining to respond to two badly designed questionnaires: not enough, I know, but.....

Ron Johnston

Reference

Castree N, 2002, "Border geography" *Area* **34** 103 – 108

Inequality, environment, and planning

The neoclassical economics of the environment is too often focused on 'getting the prices right', based on the idea that the superstructure of the market will take care of efficiency and welfare goals. It thus ignores the political economy of resource use, particularly the distribution of resources and the consequences of uneven access on the environmental resource base on which we all depend. I would argue that inequality in its economic, environmental, and geographical manifestations is among the most significant barriers to sustainable development. It is a barrier because of its interaction with individuals' lifestyles and because it prevents socially acceptable implemention of collective planning for sustainability.

In economic terms the processes leading to inequality cause marginalisation and insecurity. Marginalisation and insecurity are apparent in both the developed and the developing world. Government policies in many parts of the world in recent decades have in effect promoted an environmental redistribution from poor to rich through, for example, privatising common resources for the benefits of domestic or international economic elites. These direct distributional choices impact on the poorer sections of society, locking them into noncooperative strategies, and depriving them of the resources for collective action for local sustainability. In geographical terms, structural economic changes associated with increases in income inequality concentrate resources in fewer hands and in particular places. It has been shown both theoretically and by wide observation that such concentration leads to decisions on environment being made by groups who can insulate themselves from its consequences (Boyce, 1994). For both these reasons, rising income inequality is an anathema to sustainable development.

So is income inequality rising? It is well established that, whatever measurement is taken, inequality has been rising in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other industrialised countries over the past three decades. As Martin (2001) has pointed out, it has risen in the UK and the US most dramatically because they most slavishly followed the ideology of tax reductions and labour and capital market deregulations for the longest sustained period. It has led to social exclusion and, as Martin (2001) shows, to an intensification of spatial differences in the incidence of high and low incomes. In other words, the poor and the rich cluster together. Perhaps people of high income feel happiest that way. People of low income have little choice. In the UK rising inequality has been accompanied by rising relative poverty—the greatest incidence of poverty-ridden places is in the inner cities of northern previously industrialised Britain.

On a global scale the evidence is almost as compelling, though contested. There are many ways to interpret available global data on the distribution of income and two key questions arise: what is the gap between rich and poor, and is the gap widening? The overall evidence reveals wide discrepancies in the global economy and strong evidence that trends are worsening, as summarised and reviewed by Wade (2001). First, the gap between rich and poor by any measure is an enormous gulf. If we take the world income distribution as a single entity, then the mean incomes in the upper decile (the top 10%) are at least 25–30 times those of the lowest decile.

The answer to the second question on trends over time is not so clear. Some optimists have read the runes from global economic statistics in particular ways to argue that the level of income inequalities between the industrialising and developing world may not have increased significantly in the past decades—if countries are weighted by their population, then world income inequality has not changed much on the basis of purchasing power. But this particular statistic is a special case and does not hold for other estimations. If countries are treated equally and not weighted by size, or if incomes are estimated on the basis of market exchange rates, then world income distribution has become much more unequal in the past decades, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. So which way of estimating change is most appropriate? As Wade (2001) concludes, incomes estimated through market exchange rates are important signifiers of the real working of the global economy—according to this measure, globalisation has not worked to produce the convergence in incomes with increasing flows of trade and investment anticipated by neoclassical growth theorists. Even allowing for what people can purchase with their incomes, inequality is increasing rapidly—this latter observation comes from analysing new cross-country data based on household surveys (for example, Milanovic, 2002). The share of income going to the world's poorest fell by over a quarter between 1988 and 1993 while the share of the richest 10% rose by 8%. In other words, rising inequality at the global level over the most recent decades may be higher than even that experienced in the UK and US, the home of neoliberal economics.

What are the causes of the observed rises in inequality? At both the global scale and within countries such as the UK, the answers are both economic and geographical. Wade (2001) suggests that the most important and proximate causes of global-scale inequality trends are associated with population growth adding faster to the number of people at the lower end of the distribution than at the top end. But at the same time, the growth in the upper end of the distributions is associated with clustering of high-value knowledge-based economies in the rich world. This observation holds at other scales—the location of the new high-tech economy in the UK is predominantly in areas already well off for reasons well rehearsed by geographers. There is a further important factor in explaining rising inequality at the global scale—the economics of relative price trends of globally traded commodities. The prices of the goods and services exported by rich countries are rising compared with those exported by poorer countries. All these factors can be shown to at least contribute to changes in inequality.

Each of the causes and consequences of inequality has an environmental and sustainability dimension. High-value activities clustered in localities in the clean North are complemented in multinational corporations by locating the lower value-added, and clearly more resource-intensive and polluting activities, in the poorer countries of the South. The causes of rising income inequality are the same driving forces of global environmental inequality. Changing terms of trade also has a sustainability dimension—the same trends which cause inequality are leaving the indebted countries of the South seeking to integrate themselves into the world economy only by running at a faster rate. In many places this running faster means faster rates of land-use change, encroachment of frontier land, and choking pollution from both industrialisation and from land clearance. In many of these countries there is evidence that government regulators are not insisting on the highest standards of technology transfer by international investors coming into the country. Those at the upper end of income distributions insulate themselves from these nasty effects of unsustainability. Citizen activism against the location of harmful industries throughout the world, for example, is most successful when embarked on with the energy, connections, and resources of the professional classes (Pargal and Wheeler, 1996).

Of course, the argument that globalisation optimists put forward is that the rising inequality is concurrent with overall rising incomes, and that this solves both the moral questions of poverty and potentially even the environmental challenges of sustainability. But economic growth will only ever be compatible with environmental quality if the desirable case arises that when people become materially better off they will give increased value to their environment. There is a growing realisation in environmental economics that this is not the case for many intransigent environmental problems of unsustainability. And in aggregate terms, there are significant and rising losses of measured 'well-being' in the industrialised countries as a result of the increasing inequalities [for example, see Stymne and Jackson (2000) on the UK and Sweden].

There is no real prospect that economic growth can solve the world's environmental problems. Examining the data on trends in inequality at the global scale, for example, shows that rising income concurring with rising income inequality appears to be happening primarily in the urban regions of large developing countries such as India and China. But for each of these countries, these interregional shifts are exacerbating locational inequalities. And further, these countries are experiencing the environmental impacts of rapid urbanisation as well as unsustainable consumption patterns of newly emerging social groups. Similarly, global economic growth based on the reality of a present-day carbon economy will lead us into a globally warmed century with real and spatially skewed risks.

Improvements in the efficiency of resource use and improvements in ambient environmental quality do not happen spontaneously. They require appropriate institutional arrangements as well as effective demand from individuals or by society as a whole. For many the optimism of economic growth as salvation is laughable—the disparities in the world economic system, and even within economies such as the UK, promote and exacerbate the unsustainability. It is the poor who reside and work places where unsustainability is bad for your health and well-being and who have little or no choice in their lifestyles.

W Neil Adger

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