

Accountability: To Whom - For What?

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The idea of accountability has played a pivotal role in government rhetoric about the need for change in higher education. It is taken as read by government supporters and critics alike that higher education should be accountable, differences only emerging over precisely what should follow as a result of such a commitment. It is perhaps ironic, therefore, that the concept itself and the preconditions to ensure accountability have received so little critical scrutiny even among those who have been most skeptical regarding the main lines of government higher educational policy. The silence is indicative of a set of shared beliefs within academia and government which override apparent disagreements. It is the nature of these shared presuppositions and commitments, it will be argued here, which reinforce and legitimate a higher educational system inherently unaccountable from any democratic perspective. Higher education is itself implicated in an elitist disregard of the needs, interests and concerns of most of society's members.

What prevents a critical scrutiny of the idea of accountability is a failure to distinguish between what Ree has called education as a means of knowledge and of intellectual, literary and artistic pleasure, on the one hand, and education as a set of relations to gender, age, status and class, organised or trapped in the durable public institutions of formal schooling on the other¹. For the class of intellectuals, whose mode of reproduction is so closely tied in with the institutions of formal schooling, to question its own *modus vivendi* certain preconditions must be met. These include a fundamental rupture in the normal functioning of the relationship between the institution of schooling and its social context, such as has occurred recently only in Eastern Europe. Such ruptures are rare. In the West, even in the Nazi era, it was only a minority of educators whose ideals and interests could not be accommodated to those of their totalitarian masters. Less than a third of university teachers were sacked or forcibly retired, or fled into exile. Most at best suffered or at worst enthusiastically embraced the subtle changes in priorities which the Nazis orchestrated. These, moreover, bore a striking resemblance in form and substance to those we have been living through, and were justified in terms of a similar concept of accountability.

Parallels between the fate of higher education under the Nazis and under Dawkinism have been drawn before by several commentators. However their arguments have usually depended upon certain liberal commitments to the autonomy of education, academic freedom and the rights and liberal responsibilities of intellectuals. These commitments mask rather more than they illuminate. Thus a prerequisite for analysing and grounding a critique of Dawkinism is to distance oneself from liberal democratic educational discourse and practise a thoroughgoing skepticism regarding the educational claims as opposed to the ideological thrust of formal schooling.

When liberalism is rejected, the continuities between Nazi education and its democratic counterparts then and now can be seen to be rather more pronounced than the discontinuities. With an historical and comparative perspective, too, the contours of Dawkinesque restructuring are structurally predictable². It is what produces this convergence, we suggest, which explains the lack of a thoroughgoing critique of Dawkinism from within academia. Widespread acceptance of the ideology of the autonomy of educa-

tion from politics or the economy does not necessarily produce such a critique, whatever the liberal claims of educators. Nor does allegiance to the liberal humanist ideal of the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself ensure a civilising function for knowledge - an effective role in human betterment and individual self-development - or override the contradictions intrinsic to the practice of such commitments. The social context in which liberalism flourishes - market society - itself produces the impossibility of the general realisation of liberal ideals. Liberal cultivation was, in any case, never really disinterested³. Its instrumental functions for elite status groups were decidedly vocational, its civilising force legitimated unduly by uncivil power and domination.

The contemporary liberal critique of Dawkinism, with its blend of idealism and neo-humanism and its silence regarding the structural preconditions for liberalism's reproduction, can only aspire to the recognition that the so called general interest which Dawkin's reforms claim to address are nothing but the private and particular interests of powerful pressure groups within the economy, those of big employers, or powerful unions. This insight provides the basis for a questioning of the hijacking of "public institutions" by those whose claims do not themselves appear to have been filtered through the democratic process. But liberalism can provide no wider basis for a discussion of accountability because it cannot think through its own presuppositions and see these too as obstacles.

Let us consider, briefly, some of the regular and normal features of institutional higher education, features which taken together produce an elitist, undemocratic, unaccountable educational system from which the majority are either excluded or marginalised. Academics, as the mandarins of this system are imprisoned within a set of routines and rituals which systematically undermine the liberal goals most claim to profess. They operate, for example, within disciplinary divisions and compartments which undermine the possibility of developing any generalised holistic understandings which are a prerequisite for accounting for the social relations of Dawkinism. The claimed universalism of liberalism sits uncomfortably with hierarchical notions of ability, intelligence or merit which ideologically underpin the various forms of classification, assessment and evaluation built into the credentialing and grading system. Whilst academics may criticise this or that aspect of assessment, there are no structural opportunities as such to reverse or alter this aspect of formal education. Indeed the whole selective function of higher education is built on assessment. 'Merit' legitimises the academic selective function produced by excess demand for opportunity, whilst discrepant ambition, effort and superior talent apparently explain the differentiated performances of students as they negotiate their way through the academic market place.

Indeed, the whole career structure of academia itself, with its promotion hurdles and ideology of merit, is rarely questioned by academics, and then usually not because of hierarchies as such but because arbitrary barriers faced by some are thought to militate against a proper equality of opportunity. So deep are these commitments in the academic consciousness that the divisions between hand and brain, the academy and the ordinary world of work, are not themselves subject to deep critical scrutiny. That the leisure on which higher education depends is itself a product of

systemic class divisions in society remains hidden to most and unaddressed. At best, a concern for equity leads to rudimentary attempts to broaden the ladder of opportunity, a widening of access which has a minuscule effect on the differential life chances of most who pass through formal schooling.

Academics' belief in their own expertise, their proneness to collude with the status quo by the regular public parading of their knowledge, lends a spurious objectivity, scientificity and value freedom to debates on the great issues of the day. The cult of the expert masks the one-sided nature of most of the knowledge so paraded, its enclosure within the ideological blinkers of the establishment strata and its silence regarding possible counter-hegemonic interpretations. These latter remain largely invisible within 'informed' political debate or are relegated to the boundaries of marginalised discourse within the academy itself.

The unpleasant reality is that most academics accept the basic framework of liberal ideology which legitimates the form and content of higher education and its one-sided and anti-democratic character. The ideology of academic professionalism and professional autonomy, whilst providing some basis for a precarious and half-hearted critique of superficial aspects of Dawkinism, provides no means of developing a democratic notion of accountability because professionalism and the illusory notion of education's autonomy are integral aspects of an unjust system.

While this or that activity or policy of the government may be the subject of critical academic debate, most academics support the view that it is the responsibility of governments to sort out the economy and determine national priorities. Indeed, what academics find questionable about Dawkinism is not its coercive nature, its emanation from an essentially undemocratic polity but the mistaken ideas informing government policy. The government is seen as having 'got it wrong'. It is perceived as relying on inadequate assumptions. It is making a mistake. With better knowledge, it would adopt different policies, more conducive to meeting the 'national interest'... This is a very top-down view of politics.

Most academics thus endorse the view that higher education should be concerned with the national interest and believe that the long term, if not the short-term, health of the community is tied in with the health of its existing advanced educational system. Yet little thought has been given to how society's or the community's needs are ascertainable, how these needs can be broken down into those which may legitimately be met and those which may not, how contradictory needs can be resolved, or mechanisms be devised to respond to the claims of the powerless, the disadvantaged or the minority. Whilst many of Dawkin's opponents reject commodification and the market mechanism for deciding on priorities, few address much attention to how the existing structure of the educational system could meet the educational, research, or political priorities of those groups who lack power and influence. Whilst most academics would not be unaware of extensive social inequalities and disparities in power and influence, this state of affairs is not seen as a central educational question or the responsibility of educators to resolve. These issues are relegated to the political arena as the responsibility of governments, reconceptualised as political questions concerning which academic experts can only advise. The necessary intertwining of political with educational questions is lost in naive commitments to value freedom, and the autonomy of the political sphere, despite all the evidence which exposes this constellation of beliefs as embarrassingly inadequate.

Similarly most academics accept as plausible the view that education should secure the needs of the economy and through so doing contribute to a situation from which all can benefit. Yet few

are prepared to raise more fundamental questions about the economy, its competitive and market nature, its long term problems of reproduction, and the structural contradictions which it generates. Most are quite happy to relegate these concerns to the academic arena of the economist as if responsibility for the basic preconditions of life and well-being can be borne easily on the shoulders of a few professionals. There is little evidence of academia playing host to the kind of in-depth critical discourse about such basic questions and providing the intellectual leadership and perspective which might delegitimise the more facile popular consciousness within which economic issues are usually debated and pseudo solutions posed. In short, any notion of the academy as a locale for the pursuit of truth and critical thinking bears little relationship to what actually transpires in academia. Leaving aside some aspects of its research effort, the credentialing factory is not too far off the mark as a description of higher education today. Few traces of the critical cultural perspectives which were academically fashionable two decades ago are evident today, and those which remain sometimes remind one that cultural criticism somewhat detached from its basis in material conditions has a way of ending up as mere conservative nostalgia.

What is paradoxical is that the kind of critique of higher education on which my argument depends, was the fashionable perspective twenty years ago - before Thatcherism, Reaganism and Hawkism. Few then doubted that higher education was inherently elitist, the pinnacle of a social selection mechanism legitimated by a commitment to a misleading meritocratic ideology of equality of opportunity which masked enduring structural cleavages. Whilst the solutions then proposed were from some perspectives idealist and voluntarist, few would have risked relying on a liberal defence of academia, as this was too discredited, too implicated in the system. In place of liberalism, a reconstituted utilitarianism was more commonly espoused, albeit a utilitarianism which was thought to be more relevant to the needs of the disadvantaged. Small wonder, then, that two decades later, Dawkinism can erase with such ease the remnant of the liberal veneer from academia using a revitalised rhetoric of utilitarianism and invoking the absolute primacy of restructuring higher education to serve a so-called skill and research-based recovery? Although some academics think this faith is illusory, most academics are prepared to do little more than huff and puff about salaries, and adjust to the subsumption of their labour power under the new managerial prerogatives.

The dominant perspectives within academia do not shed much light on this matter. One has only to scrutinise the range of paradigms at work within the sociology of education to see how mute the different theoretical traditions are when confronted with Dawkinism. We will exclude empiricist positivism and technocratic rationalism from this survey since neither makes any theoretical claims. In the early to mid nineteen eighties, various strands of neo-Marxism became a fashionable near orthodoxy for many wishing to understand the forms and content of capitalist schooling. The key element of this orthodoxy was the adherence to a correspondence thesis - the view that the structure and direction of education reflects and is constrained in its development by the 'needs' of the economy. Neo-Marxism, of course, did not emerge in a vacuum. It arose out of the end of the Long Boom, the coming together of a range of economic and political circumstances which fractured more consensual world views and apparent social harmony. Neo-Marxism, despite its often crude formulations, permitted what had hardly been possible before, a conceptual distinction between state provided schooling and Education and the recognition that the one was not synonymous with the other. Education (with a capital E) was thought necessarily to entail critique, especially of the taken for granted assumptions at every level of society. Through such critique, the class reproduc-

tive aspects of formal schooling could be rigorously exposed.

The other (and I think enduring) contribution of neo-Marxism was that, for all its crudity, it went to the heart of the matter. It perceived correctly that educational goals and objectives cannot aim higher than the mode of production to have any hope of being implemented. It showed, too, the mechanisms whereby Dawkinism, like its Reaganite or Thatcherite counterparts is just what one would expect during periods of capitalist recession: an attack on non-instrumental areas of schooling, especially those niches housing a potential for radical critique.

Thus, early formulations of this critique of formal schooling linked its form and content with the functional requirements of capitalism as mediated by the capitalist state. Critics of this thesis, however, were unhappy about what were defined as its functionalist underpinnings, its neglect of relative autonomy and the multiple level of mediations which intervene and modify the pressure exerted by external needs⁴. The hegemony of this perspective did not last very long. It was thought to be too disabling, allowing no spaces for radical academic practice. In place of what was defined as a simplistic and reductivist Marxism, by the late nineteen seventies we saw re-emerging a pluralist Weberianism, stressing complexity, and multiple determinations, structuring the forms and content of education. It was somewhat paradoxical that, just as evidence of a more ruthless instrumentalisation of higher education manifested itself, theoretical frameworks which precluded a perception of anything other than multiple causal influences became fashionable. These offered little explanatory purchase on the restructuring of educational policy and permitted no effective defence of the importance of critique.

More problematic, however, than the re-emergence of pluralism, which at least did not deny the structural inequality within education, or delegitimise the search for more equitable outcomes, was the re-emergence within the humanities and social sciences of a fashionable relativism and irrationalism. Claiming to distance itself from Dawkinism's vocationalism and utilitarianism, and parading itself as radical and speaking on behalf of the oppressed, 'postmodern' discourse has recently become hegemonic, within the academy. For many it seems to provide an alternative, still committed to the pursuit of intellect - to the pragmatism of Dawkinism. But are these postmodern views any more progressive than those they displaced? The vocabulary of accountability - with its ethical connotations that institutions and departments ought to be answerable to the 'community', 'the public', 'the people' - sits uncomfortably with perspectives committed to a radical deconstruction of all discourses, in favour of postmodern skepticism, ambiguity and the celebration of difference. Any realist analysis of Dawkinism from which a critique might be mounted now runs the risk of being dismissed as totalising, or even 'terroristic', especially any perspective which bases its moral stance on an anti-capitalist position or utilises the language of class. The radical critique discussed earlier, whatever its claimed scientificity (indeed, in virtue of it), is from the viewpoint of the discourse of postmodernity, nothing but the imposition of a 'master metanarrative'. Its claims to validity are on a par with Dawkinism itself. The only viable position, for the postmodernist, is the reject of all positions - save for his or her own.

And yet, seen from another viewpoint this 'advanced' position, despite its self-concept as other than and radically opposed to Dawkinism, seems more like the latter's mirror image. Just as fascism inspired the reactionary modernists with their fascination with the aesthetics of technology and production⁵, so too does the discourse of postmodernity promote yearnings for the hi-tech 'route' to economic salvation on which the instrumentalisation of education is based.

Postmodernity celebrates the post-fordist utopia in which the service economy prevails, where older, more primitive technologies give way to advanced combinations of computer-based technologies and information systems, and speeded up communication flows. Whilst purporting to grasp the present and its new constellations and trajectories, it risks, indeed, sometimes celebrates, an entrapment by surface phenomena and a blindness regarding deeper structural processes. Similarly, its rejection of any extra-discursive basis for values pre-empts the possibility of criticising the present or offering alternatives as effectively as Hume's law within positivism. The overall outcome is the same unthinking acceptance of the celluloid life-world of the commodity in which the price of everything is known and the value of nothing⁶. This is a long way from the counter hegemonic discourse of the early 1970s.

The earlier radical critique of schooling permitted linkages to be drawn between imperialism and the structure and content of the academy. Chomsky, for example, brilliantly exposed the role of the new mandarins in the Vietnam war and their subservience to the American war effort. Many of the leaders of the currently fashionable discourse of postmodernity were implicated in the network of social struggles of the New Left, where calls for a transformation of consciousness, anti-imperialism and cultural radicalism often went together. The new mandarins of the eighties, by contrast, although lining themselves up against 'occidental discourse', seem singularly uninvolved in radical politics and detached from organisations or pressure groups politically mobilising for alternative futures.

The academic trade unions, facing the same contradictions and dilemmas, are no more able to provide a democratic defence of critical intellectual enquiry in the face of Dawkinism or the basis for a more accountable education than the various theoretical practices within the academy. Unable to make the links between a discourse about education and a political discussion about the basis for a good life, economically and politically, the unions are by default forced to accommodate themselves to various 'education industry' plans under the master project of 'Australia reconstructed'⁷. This leaves all the problematic features of the existing political and economic order unscrutinised.

The option to adopt a thoroughgoing critical attitude to the status quo and argue for a fundamentally different kind of economic and, hence, educational order is eschewed. In its place appears a series of ad hoc or non-fundamental criticisms of particular features of the status quo which would leave most of its deformations intact. The failure of the main historical alternative to the market - Eastern-European socialism - lends legitimacy to what at best is a piecemeal reformism, and this can so easily deteriorate into a conservative and backward looking self-interested defensiveness.

The result is that those conceptions of education which historically distanced themselves from the institutionalised deformation of education in state provided schooling have now no inspirational models of a future beyond capitalism on which to draw. The history of anticapitalist self-educational experiments, independent of the academy and formal schooling, has yet to be written. Far more attention has been given to the institutionalised form of public education in academic historiography.

For those seeking a greater degree of accountability to the community from higher education, it is worth while dwelling on some aspects of this neglected history of educational initiatives from below which were not channelled and incorporated by the institutional framework of formal schooling. The strongest element of this non-institutionalised tradition of education was that

which was linked to the radical history of the labour movement - its socialist ranks - and still exists today, in however muted a form. This tradition envisages a very different relationship with the working class and its educational aspirations and has an inherently non-elitist conception of accountability. An education worth having is one which is accountable to the subordinate, powerless majority, conceptualised in non-individualised terms, as the class on whose work and efforts the interests of the whole community is thought properly to depend. Unlike the dominant ideologies of state schooling, this other tradition correctly perceives that an accountable education is inextricably linked to issues of class emancipation, to the search for a different kind of social, economic and political order. Those aspirations have little to do with the demand to expand the rate of social mobility which allows, for some, an individualised exit route from the working class but not from the class structure as such. This other tradition correctly perceives that state schooling, even at its pinnacles, could never offer the majority more than an unhappy accommodation to an unjust system or a chance to better oneself within it⁸.

The bourgeois academy, structurally isolated from the collective struggles in work places and local communities for reforms and improvements to the conditions in which people live their lives, isolates the quest for knowledge from considerations of economic and political justice with which ideally it should be linked. The contemplative life which academia fosters reinforces an idealist view of knowledge production as primarily a matter of the intellect alone rather than the product of collective social practices and reflections on the experience of struggle. It fosters, too, the illusion that successful reforms depend ultimately on the struggle for better ideas, as if the latter can achieve their own implementation.

The bipolar divisions of the labour movement into what eventually became an incorporated social democratic strand and the various tendencies further to the left, which permanently rejected any accommodation with capitalism, has been paralleled historically by an educational division. The fate of the bourgeois higher educational system is inextricably bound to the fate of social democracy. The most it can offer is ideological justifications of piecemeal reformism. When reformism is under threat, as it has been everywhere in the 1980s, a backward looking self-interested defensiveness becomes the order of the day. The real thrust of social democracy as manager of institutionalised inequality and capitalist social relations is now transparent.

But the non-incorporated educational tradition is also in crisis, especially in the industrialised world. The defeat and failure of historical alternatives to the market in Eastern Europe, coupled with the overwhelming evidence of the undemocratic nature of these non-capitalist systems, pose problems for those unwilling to throw in their lot with capitalism. If there is no existing democratic socialist alternative to the market place then maybe social democracy is the only viable alternative and Dawkinism its peak of rationality?

To think this is to forget that the market means subjection to corporate capitalism, and this can only ever be emancipatory for capital. An accountable capitalism is, on any world historical scale, a structural absurdity. Only a democratic sharing of resources and a conserving productive system which is planned and socially controlled can deliver accountability. Social democracy and Dawkinism are market-driven far more than conversely.

The inability of the academic unions to transcend the horizons of most of their members arises from the isolated structural location of academia and the fragmented petit bourgeois nature of the academic labour process. But the mass production of con-

sciousness of the new middle class functionaries of corporate capitalism is only just beginning. Dawkinism provides but a glimpse of what is to come. The proletarianisation of academic labour reflected in the relative decline of salaries vis a viz other functionaries of corporate capitalism will be reversible only if the struggle against it is broadened to become a struggle against all forms of class domination. That such a struggle is unlikely to be led by academics from the bourgeois schooling system goes without saying. But it will be led by knowledgeable activists whose traditions of struggle also include the desire for more appropriate understanding, and a commitment to a critical perspective towards dominant world views. That there will be some linkages between the academy and radical movements within society is also to be expected. It is certainly true that the most thorough going critiques of capitalist social relations globally emanate from isolated niches within the academy, despite the structural pressures to silence them. But the prevailing mood of academia reflects the mood in its broader environment. And it is this which places the radical anti-capitalist academic in a painful dilemma today. Deserted by most of their colleagues, who, unwilling to be thought outmoded have embraced various transient fashions in pursuit of their careers, and unable to effect single-handedly a progressive version of Dawkinism, the anti-capitalist seeks to keep alive a vision of a socialist future in a context where the objective conditions for its fulfilment are perhaps less propitious than at any other time in the twentieth century. The point of so doing lies in the continued generation of ever more massive fissures and contractions on a world scale - economic, ecological, social, political - which belie a post-industrial future, or the end of history and of class antagonisms. That such contradictions, leading to abominations like the recent Gulf War cry out for analysis and generate ripples even within academia creates a challenge for those searching for a democratic version of accountability. The struggle to achieve the latter will not, like Dawkinism, be orchestrated from above but is inscribed in popular aspirations to achieve a just society. Worthwhile education is inextricably linked to a broader struggle for democracy and social justice on a world scale. To the extent to which academics lend their energies to such struggles, they will avoid heteronomy and historical irrelevance.

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