Tracking the Nomadic Life of the Educational Researcher: What Future for Feminist Public Intellectuals and the Performative University?

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Abstract

Is the idea of the liberal university dead, has the postmodern university any chance of being emancipatory, has the theory–practice divide merely collapsed in an era of 'new knowledge work', or has the university just become one aspect of market states and global capitalism? Knowledge-based economies locate universities as central to the commodification and management of knowledge, while at the same time the legitimacy of the university and the academic as knowledge producers is challenged by postmodernist, feminist, post-colonial and indigenous claims within a wider trend towards the 'democratisation of knowledge' and a new educational instrumentalism and opportunism. What becomes of the educational researcher, and indeed their professional organisations, in this changing socio-political and economic scenario? Is our role one of policy service, policy critique, technical expert or public intellectual? In particular what place is there for feminist public intellectuals in a so-called era of post-feminism and public–private convergence? The paper draws on feminist and critical perspectives to mount a case for the importance of the public intellectual in the performative postmodern university.

Universities, knowledge, markets and governmentalities

Many social theorists argue that we have undergone radical transformations in social, political and economic life in the late twentieth century marked by shifts in relations between the individual, communities, the state and markets in the context of globalisation. Have we, as Beck (1992, p. 9) suggests, been 'eye witnesses, subjects and objects, of a break within modernity'?[1] What does this mean for the future of the university and for us as academics working within the interdisciplinary field of

education, and indeed for our professional organisations. Is there a place for public intellectuals and feminists in particular to work within/against new governmentalities and organisations marked by performativity and corporatisation?

Information has become a core product of commercial exchange, and the management of information a key occupational sector, together with a move from production to consumption. The informational society is characterised by 'more and more information, and less and less meaning' (Baudrillard 1983, p. 95). Audiences are more 'creative and aware, more reflective and sceptical'. Knowledge, the primary rationale for the modern university's formation, is now the centre of the economy. Calas and Smircich (2001, p. 148) comment:

> The moment 'knowledge' was positioned as a commodity in the wider context of capitalist modes of production and 'free market' forces, universities were to receive declining support for continuing as sanctioned sites for the production of innovations in the arts, the sciences and the professions, and still less support for continuing as places of 'disinterested knowledge' in the quest for a better society.

Debate within the academy as to the future role of the university has centred around four positions described by Delanty (2001):

1. The *entrenched liberal critique* views the university as a site of cultural reproduction. The liberal left opposes vocationalism in which generic competencies supplant the generalist skills of liberal education. The right's opposition to cultural studies, feminism, and multiculturalism rests on the defence of the traditional culture of the canon that is elitist and patriarchal, a deeply conservative strong humanism based on the arts and high culture. Both advocate a universal humanism that depicts postmodernism as producing an 'absence of values' (Barnett and Griffin 1997, p. 60).

2. The *postmodern thesis* foresees the end of the state and of the university, the university having lost its emancipatory role due to the fragmentation of knowledge and separation of research from teaching. This position is encapsulated in Lyotard's (1984) notion of performativity that specifies efficiency and effectiveness as the chief criteria by which knowledge and its worth is judged. Whether it is true, just or morally important reduces to whether it is efficient, marketable or 'translatable into information quantities' (Bloland 1995, p. 12). Higher education is less about what students learn and more about what students are worth.

3. The *reflexivity thesis* claims that there is a new mode of knowledge based on a reflexive relationship between the user and producer of knowledge in post-Fordist

economies (e.g. Barnett 1997). Traditional disciplinary-based knowledge that is hierarchical, homogenous and autonomous is replaced by transdisciplinary knowledge that is fluid, accountable and reflexive, collapsing the artificial theory–practice dichotomy. Critics of this position simplistically equate interdisciplinarity with problem solving and the demise of theory, 'a virus that lacks identity', that is contentless, only producing 'strategies of usefulness' (Wortham 1999, p. 79). Advocates cite the dynamic tension of interdisciplinarity enjoyed in education and women's studies in which experience, particularly of marginalised groups and so readily devalued by modernity, is now all the go, privileging agency and reflexivity (McNay 2000).

4. The *globalisation thesis* focuses on the instrumentalisation of the university as it embraces market values, informational technology and vocationalism as the university becomes integrated into capitalist modes of production through the strategies of corporatisation: managerialism and marketisation. The enterprise university is a major player in information-based capitalism and we, as academic capitalists, are complicit (Marginson and Consindine 2001, Rhoades and Slaughter 1998).

Academic ambivalence towards recent reforms arises from experiencing all the above trends simultaneously. Academics experience new controls (to be more accountable) and new freedoms (to be more entreprenuerial), all the time more visible so that 'contentments of stability are increasingly elusive, purposes are contradictory, motivations blurred and self worth slippery' (Ball 2000, p. 3).

These shifts have produced both external and internal threats to the modern university. Externally, universities are no longer the primary definers of what counts as valued knowledge in the public sphere. The penetration of communication into both knowledge and cultural production has occurred at the same time that the notion of professionalism is under revision. Universities' claims as definers, designers and deliverers of professional knowledge are weaker. Academic curriculum and pedagogy is increasingly driven by student choice, student satisfaction surveys, and teaching and learning management plans. Performativity-based excellence and image has taken over from performance based on content or substance. The university student is no longer the 'embodiment of generalised social, national or ethnic values', the passive recipient of knowledge, a 'reasoning individual of the Enlightenment', but is a more volatile object/subject as 'a consuming individual' (Barnett and Griffin 1997, p. 5). The learner earner is presumed to be a self-managing individual who is flexible, adaptable, self-motivated, independent, making educational choices based on the desire to position themselves optimally. These students know what they wish to learn and how to learn it, and so arbitrarily reject knowledge and expertise without justification. This privileging of

student satisfaction creates a crisis for academic authority. On the one hand, specialist expertise is only valued for its perceived immediate vocational relevance. On the other hand, diverse student demands expect gender and culturally inclusive pedagogies, access, fair representation and inclusive curriculum, confronting disciplinary pedagogies that assume liberalism equals egalitarianism equals meritocracy. The capacity of academics to deliver either is subverted by the material conditions of massification that equate bigger classes with 'better' (more efficient) teaching.

Internally the legitimacy of the university and of the academic as definers of valued knowledge has been challenged by the democratisation of knowledge, which has produced less of a collapse of knowledge or standards and more a type of 'epistemological wobble' (Scott 1997, p. 15). The universities' dual historical role in the production of 'knowledge as science' and 'knowledge as culture' was challenged in the 1960s by student and women's movements. Post-structuralism, feminism and anti-foundationalism took on the 'universities' disciplinarity, autonomy and epistemological authority' (Barnett and Griffin 1997, p. 17). The Gulbenkian Commission on the Social Sciences (Wallerstein et al. 1996, pp. 54–5) pointed out that 'male social scientists have studied themselves' over the past 200 years and studied 'others' as 'reflections or contrasts to themselves'. The solution was to expand scholarly recruitment. While the universal consensual view of the modern liberal university was put under pressure, the 'radicalisation of democratic citizenship' arising from the advocacy of civil rights, democratic socialism and feminism was largely extra-epistemic, concerned more with ideas of justice, happiness and equality, but which left 'disciplinary based knowledge unscathed' (Delanty 2001, p. 2). Others see that the democratisation of knowledge in the late 1990s has meant changes in the structure of knowledge itself, producing a different cognitive structure in society and a more reflexive role for knowledge. Postmodernism, together with new communications, has fundamentally changed power–knowledge relations. Ironically, massification has become pervasive at the same time as traditional intellectual structures are being dismantled (Scott 1997, p. 15).

Within universities, what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is constituted, and indeed how it is counted, has also been revised by the entrepreneurial or performative state, seeking not to invest in, but rather to accrue wealth from, education. The role of universities has shifted more towards managing knowledge production for the state in the national interest rather than the production of disciplinary knowledge for its intrinsic value.

Finally, there is an emerging divide between academics and managers with a move to 'hybrid' managerialism that dominates collegiate cooperation in both teaching and

research, as research meets government and industrial demands. The academic becomes a piece worker serving an expanding new professional middle class of administrators. The management of knowledge production and dissemination has become the core work of universities, repositioning academics as managed professionals. In this scenario, maybe, 'The last (action) hero of the university is neither the student or the academic but the administrator' (Wortham 1999, p. 4). The conditions of academic work have also radically altered – marked by the intensification of labour, with a doubling of students since 1984, and doubling the proportion of casual academic labour to 14 per cent since 1996. Leaner and meaner university governance further marginalises the academic voice and the research professoriate in policy and decision making. Partnerships with industry, government and communities have produced new public–private hybridities, weakening universities' special protection against free trade agreements, while private providers gain access to public funding and academic intellectual property. There is a 'tightening of relationships between multinational corporations and state agencies around product development and innovation, and global intellectual property strategies' (Slaughter and Leslie 1998, p. 37).

The paradox is that universities have become less financially dependent on government (30% recurrent income down from over 60% a decade ago once student contributions and fees are excluded). Yet they are increasingly more regulated by government in terms of *what knowledge* is valued and how it is managed. The conditions of academic freedom and ownership of intellectual property are under threat. In response to risk, governments and universities have sought greater control through audits and a range of performativities such as research quantums, performance management and quality assurance. Marilyn Strathern (2000, p. 2) refers to an 'audit culture' in which these new accountabilities both obstruct and enable good practice as 'the financial and the moral meet in the twinned precepts of economic efficiency and ethical practice'.

These new accountabilities have significant effects on intellectual life. The audit is difficult to critique in principle as 'it advances the very language that academics hold dear such as transparency, responsibility and access' (Strathern 2000, p. 5). Under these new disciplinary technologies, academics have expressed a growing sense of being out of control, being more controlled and yet alienated individually and collectively from their core work of teaching and research as the performativity exercises have less and less to do with the core work of teaching and research and more and more to do with image management (Ball 2000, Blackmore and Sachs 2000, 2001). 'The world of impression management, judgements and penalties is creating new professional subjectivities, new modes of description and new organisational identities' (Morley 2001, p. 3). Self-managing academics reconstruct themselves

continuously, simultaneously internalising and rejecting the performative. These exercises of performativity, while rarely real in their representations, are real in their effects. In particular, the focus on measurable outcomes 'threatens notions of broader intellectual qualities, knowledge and understanding' (Barnett and Griffin 1997, pp. 4–5). Many academics now perceive universities as greedy and unhealthy organisations, nurturing high risk and low trust environments (Morley 2001). Academics' loyalty is simultaneously more localised, trusting only their immediate colleagues, and internationalised through intellectual connections to networks of international researchers within their field, but investing little trust in their university (Blackmore 2001).

The Australian university is therefore both modernist and postmodernist. Modernist discourses based on notions of academic freedom, professional training, the power of science, and the 'generalisability' of liberal education that gained legitimacy during the twentieth century are circulating together with postmodern discourses of connectivity, diversity and inclusiveness as well as those of instrumentalism, relevance, aptitudes, problem solving and entrepreneurialism. Collectively these 'multiple crises' signal new hard times for the modern 'liberal arts' university with its classics curriculum, teacher-centred learning and labour-intensive research. This has implications for the humanities because, as utilitarian knowledge is privileged, technical competence rather than professional judgement becomes the main game, as evident in the 'new instrumentalism' of Australian education policies.

The national higher education 'policy scape': unstable terrain for educational research

Recent policy discourses, both the Australian Coalition's *Backing Australia's Ability* (DETYA 2001a) and Labor's *Knowledge Nation* (Chifley Research Centre 2001) assume an instrumentalist view, perceiving education and knowledge as a new form of economic *production* that can be commodified as an export earner through its massification, vocationalisation, marketisation and internationalisation. Australia is now fourth in the global education market in international students. Education has become a key industry in Australia, returning $22 billion for the investment of $9 billion. Three of Australia's universities are in the top 100 Australian multinational companies, and Australia's education exports rank only behind wheat (Allport 2001, p. 8). Strategically, Australian higher education reform has adhered closely to the neo-liberal market policy orthodoxies of the IMF and World Bank that disinvested in public education. By contrast, the European Union has reinvested in higher education and equity, as education and equity are seen to promote economic growth as well as cultural cohesion and identity (Lingard and Rizvi 1997, p. 270). Yet Australia is still considered

by international finance markets as an old (material-based) economy not a new (information-based) economy because of low government and business investment in education, training, research and development. Since 1996, R&D fell by 5 per cent while universities lost $3.5 billion in government funding. In its recent review of higher education (see Nelson 2002) the government refused to accept universities were in crisis financially, but focused on reducing government costs by raising student fees, failing to reconceptualise the future role of the university in the context of knowledge-based economies (see AARE 2002, Marginson 2001).

Official policies have also constructed the crisis as one in science and technology, a position informed by influential scientific lobbying. The Batterham Report (2000, p. 20), while focusing on innovation, skill, coordination of communication and knowledge, research and the commercialisation of intellectual output as central to shifting from an old to a new economy, failed to address how these rely upon the humanities and social sciences. *Crossroad*'s (Nelson 2002) implicit message was that the future for educational research, social sciences and humanities was to 'mimic science' both in its technique and organisation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 177). The Australian Association of Research in Education (2002) submission to the *Crossroads* review, like those of the Academies of Social Sciences and of Humanities, argued that social science and humanities are most productive when based on principles of diversity, diversification and dispersion and not research concentration. Productivity requires the 'maintenance of a reasonable diversity of disciplines within institutions (in part, to facilitate intellectual cross-fertilization) and a reasonable spread of university resources across the community' (AAP 2001, p. 5). Instead *Crossroads* exacerbated past dichotomies and old hierarchies. As Sheehan and Poole (2002, p. 57) comment,

> The mechanisms and procedures distributing resources for research in the Humanities and Social Sciences play little heed to the character of these disciplines. Publication practices, data collections, definitions of socio-economic objectives, and the method of distribution of research resources are all much more heavily oriented to the Natural Sciences than to the Humanities and Social Sciences and this has been so for a long time.

This policy mentality has severe implications for educational research. Broadly, it fails to realise the critical role of the humanities and social sciences in innovation in terms of cultural, philosophical and ethical issues as well as 'critical analysis of value and meaning' (Sheehan and Poole 2002, p. 56). *Crossroads* indicated little understanding of the differences between fields of research or the productive tension arising from interdisciplinarity, and the strengths of reflexive knowledge approaches in educational

research embodied in the learner-earner of the professional doctorate based in praxis. Ironically, existing research training policies' capping mean that newer and regional universities, many with large faculties of education, will become non-research institutions at the same time as Australian educational research capacity in state departments is reduced (90% of educational research is done in universities compared to 40% on average in other industries) and research policies encourage local research-based partnerships with industry and community. Collectively, these policies perpetuate rather than collapse the theory–practice divide, focus on strong disciplinarity rather than interdisciplinarity, and consolidate applied–pure dichotomies. Such policy scapes fit squarely into Delanty's 'globalisation thesis' depicting universities' centrality to global capitalism rather than reflexive modernisation.

Moving policy scapes for educational research

What are the implications of these policy scapes for educational research?

First, they signal the rapidly changing relationship between educational research and policy. Past emphasis has been on policy as providing warnings or as post hoc justification for policy decisions. The predicament for educational sociologists is that we are complicit in the work of production of official problems, as 'everyone believes that they have innate knowledge of the social world … Sociology is amenable to immediate, direct judgement of outsiders … At the same time sociology is expected to respond to demands for answers on questions that touch everybody' (Bourdieu 1996, pp. 186–7). Marginson (2001, p. 4) argues that the social sciences are 'insufficiently pure in that they are too fond of getting their hands dirty, too broadly curious, too prone to borrow ideas, and too accommodating of others, too interfering in others' business'.

There is also a renewed scepticism about the capacity of educational research to influence policy and practice. The catalogue of complaints against educational research are that it is

(i)   not sufficiently persuasive and authoritative, providing compelling and unambiguous results;

(ii) not relevant to the practice of teachers, ignoring their constraints;

(iii) inaccessible to teachers or expressed in a incomprehensible way.

Overall, education systems are portrayed as being either intractable and unable to change or overly susceptible to fads (Kennedy 1997, p. 4). Kennedy (1997, p. 10)

responds, arguing that persuasiveness is less about having a strong research design than having the appropriate design for the question; relevance is more than answering teachers' questions but is also about research influencing teachers' thinking; and that the research–practice relationship is very much about politics and context, not just quality of research. Generalisable research findings do not necessarily have greater explanatory power; conceptual accessibility does not challenge current thinking, and ambiguity and conflict arise because of the intransigence of popular beliefs or divergent political agendas. The problem is more that 'educational researchers have no particular authoritative advantage in the public arena' (Kennedy 1997, p. 10). Researchers, for example under DEST's 'Open for Business' policy to consult widely, are positioned as one of many stakeholders in policy formation, with no privileged position recognising possible specialist expertise that may provide 'guidance' and indeed 'enlightenment' to policy makers.

Second, certain types of educational research continue to be privileged by official policy discourses in the struggle between 'policy delivery' and 'policy critique' (Atkinson 2000a). Australian government invests in research consultancies to directly inform policy problems as defined and owned by them. Research for policy delivery constrains the way research is carried out and presented – truncated by time limits, contractual arrangements, and questions of ownership. It often ignores the bigger picture, obscuring the true nature of the problem. Yet in education, since the abolition of the Education and Research and Development Committee in 1981, there has been no federally funded independent and dedicated research funding body supporting pure educational research, a source of possible policy critique, as exists in other industries. As a consequence, many academics experience '"critical schizophrenia" as they deliver government policies with the one hand and critique them with the other' (Atkinson 2000a, p. 15).

Third, within the field of professional practice, there has been increased exhortation for evidence-based policy and practice and for 'what works', that is, applied research. While this has the appearance of moving towards greater reflexivity, evidence-based practice is premised upon a narrow medical model that privileges statistical analysis of large populations to inform system-wide policies on the one hand, and simplistically reduces evidence to 'raw data' on the other (Blackmore 2002). Evidence-based practice as it is currently constructed fails to question the epistemological assumptions and claims about different forms of knowledge, or to address the complexity underpinning 'what works' in schools, often reducing teaching to technological knowledge that has to be codified and explicated in commonsense language. There is little place here for theory or reflexivity while there is a privileging of practice and the applied. Yet teacher practitioners are nervous about 'prescriptive' generalisations that policy makers favour, and prefer 'fuzzy' generalisations of

research that allow them to make professional judgements about research (DETYA 2001b). Teachers may not be good at articulating theories about their practice, but their practice is grounded in theories of learning. 'It is theory rather than evidence that permeates teacher's thoughts and actions, it is theory that points to new possibilities, that disrupts and that is the basis of teachers' practical or tacit knowledge as evident in the infiltration of recent theoretical concepts in the everyday language of teachers' (Atkinson 2000b, p. 325). What works is only one dimension.

Fourth, the capacity of researchers to influence policy is increasingly mediated by the media (Blackmore and Thorpe, in press). Governments use the media to manufacture consent for policy shifts, test reactions to policies and disseminate policy. 'Yet pseudo scientific technology of rational demagogy which can give them little more than extorted answers to imposed questions that the individuals surveyed often did not raise, in the terms until they were raised for them' (Bourdieu 1996, pp. 2–4). Public opinion is then recycled back through market polling to justify policies, avoiding the 'quagmire of intellectual complexity'. Thus media-generated policy hysteria diverts attention from really close policy analysis. Researchers are meanwhile caught between simplifying research for public or policy consumption and seeking to draw attention to the complexity that theoretically informed research brings to any policy problem.

Fifth, the status of educational researchers as experts and public advocates is challenged by the declining legitimacy of the professions in the late twentieth century with the democratisation of knowledge on the one hand, and the new public administration's focus on outcomes (retention and graduation rates), efficiency and professional demands for graduate attributes on the other. Professionalism is becoming more a matter of technical expertise and less about public advocacy (Brint 1994).

Finally, the increasingly open market in the field of policy research finds consultancy arms of multinational companies now doing more public policy research than universities at the same time that public funding for university-based research is decreasing. These unregulated private providers are not governed by ethics, intellectual rigour or peer review and can therefore be more responsive, and perhaps more subordinate to industry and government demands.

Is there space for the 'tenured radical' in the postmodern university?

So in the above context, is there any leverage left in the notion of the 'public intellectual'? What is the basis of our claims? Feminist, black and gay academics, while resistant to recent corporate agendas, did not experience any ideal past. Academic freedom was

premised upon knowledge production as an 'objective science' that coopted, subjugated and marginalised their collective experiences. Perhaps the lack of collective reaction by academics is a result of the subtle infiltration of the processes of globalisation (marketisation, privatisation and managerialism) weakening resistance. Or are academics just more committed to their disciplinary cultures than their collective collegial culture?

Academic freedom, the capacity to speak without fear in the public arena, is a consequence of past conquests. Freedom does not come without the social conditions of, or responsibilities arising from, any freedom. The conditions of academic freedom are currently to have institutional autonomy, individual autonomy and autonomy of the disciplinary field. While recent reforms tend to separate institutional from individual autonomy, Slaughter and Leslie (1998) argue that these are interdependent and that academic freedom requires some condition of collective right of self-governance. Others see academic freedom or individual autonomy as being the exercise of professional judgements without fear, and this requires institutional autonomy (Vidovich and Currie 1998, pp. 193–5).

So to what extent is academic freedom to be public intellectuals protected by the sponsorship of universities? Academics have always been knowledge workers. During the Middle Ages, academics were without institutions, nomadic scholars attracting students. The nineteenth century witnessed the institutionalisation of the scholar by the state, and state-funded research universities after 1945. The academic then became a twentieth-century employee, a member of the technical intelligentsia divided between technocrats and humanitarians (public and private sector professionalism). Now the institutional base of higher education, as well as the capacity of the nation-state to harness academic productivity, is under threat. Will academics become marginal or core workers within the globally mobile class of symbolic analysts, the professionals/managers who design work for the technicians and service classes? Perhaps the 'scholar traveller' of the twenty-first century will gain her academic authority increasingly from the global 'virtual' networks to which she is connected rather than from her institution? This global connectivity could encourage even greater academic self-promotion without any sense of local, national or institutional loyalty. Connectivity can also be altruistic, as exemplified in Willinsky's (2002) Public Knowledge Project at the University of British Columbia. This project seeks to advance knowledge through research and teaching based on peer-to-peer communication at the institutional level, creating a 'social contract for science' for the public good. This requires commitment by academics to communicate their knowledge, to foster education and further democratic participation, as it is the 'love of learning and pursuit of knowledge that has driven so many of us in this line of work' (Willinsky 2002, p. 370).

But has the modern university seen the domestication of the intellectual and of critique? Are we socially unattached intelligentsia whose redemption lies with education, marginalised exiles, complicit actors in governmentality, or agents of civic professionalism. In the next section, I explore some of these issues about intellectuals' engagement with 'the public' by considering contemporary relations between feminists as academics and feminism as a social movement.

Feminist academics, feminism as a social movement, and the nature of their engagement

Feminism has framed for many academics their relations with the 'public' based on obligations beyond the university and towards a collective project to improve the lot of women. This commitment meant feminists raised equity issues in a range of public, academic, educational and university forums to inform or take political action. But the conditions of engagement have changed. Feminism in the 1980s was largely a them (men) against us (women) position not confused by the complexities of black, post-colonial, postmodern feminist theory or indeed pro-feminist theories of masculinity. It was a period in which feminist theory pushed the theoretical and political boundaries, dominated the shelves of bookstores, and excited academic publishers. Within universities, there were feminist debates about the emancipatory possibilities of critical pedagogy from the 1970s. The modernist critical and feminist intellectual believed in empowerment through providing a voice, in which the intellectual was the autonomous resisting subject (Fendler 1999).

The liberal state was a site of negotiation and struggle, actively mobilising and resisting the feminist project. The femocrats, the feminist bureaucrats who precariously bridged the chasm between those advocating a practical politics and feminist ideals, proactively sought to reduce discrimination in the political sphere while in schools feminist activists provided a groundswell of grassroots politics. Australian feminist politics by the late 1980s was a model of how to progress a national reform agenda, with bottom-up and top-down strategies working sometimes together, and often not, but resulting in a complex equity infrastructure and a set of strategic practices (Blackmore 2000). These equity strategies relied upon close connections between feminist academics and the women's movement. Women's studies was seen to provide epistemological space for the voice of women's experiences in the academy. At the same time, the equity agenda in policy was framed within a liberal feminist rights-based discourse and academic feminisms were grounded in a predominantly white, middle-class feminist social movement.

Feminism and feminists within the restructured academy have been repositioned in the past decade of structural reforms, cultural shifts, New Right political agendas and market-driven policies. During the 1980s, Labor's education policies sought to juggle between equity, efficiency and effectiveness. Since 1996, the feminist political project has been undermined as the Howard Coalition has actively promoted radical neo-liberal market policies on the one hand, increasingly deregulating academic and student markets, and raising fees, while on the other hand promoting social conservatism by attacking targetted equity strategies impacting particularly on mature-aged women's and indigenous students' access to higher education (Bunda and McConville 2002). Post-welfarism has put gender equity strategies of working within/against the state at risk, with the dismantling and mainstreaming of the gender equity infrastructure. Feminists increasingly appeal to international polities such as the United Nations on the basis of international human rights (Blackmore and Sachs 2003, Bacchi 2001). Culturally, Howard has facilitated a discursive backlash against difference by mobilising discourses against reconciliation, feminism and multiculturalism while claiming to be acting in the national interest through xenophobic policies against 'the other' who are to be excluded such as refugees. This conjuncture of social conservatism and economic radicalism has produced a dangerous moment for social justice in the workplace, the education field and the academy. Deregulation in the marketplace has further casualised labour differentiated along class, race, ethnic and gender lines. Highly prescriptive and normative stances in the social sphere promote assimilationist views of social cohesion, conceptualising difference as a practical matter (e.g. practical reconciliation) (Taylor 1996). With equity being premised upon women's contribution to national productivity, the debate is relocated into the economic sphere, lacking any moral or normative dimension, rather than being seen as a matter of human rights.

Within the academy, while many believe the feminist project of equality has been achieved with the increase in the numbers of female vice chancellors and the numerical feminisation of students, this is more symbolic than real. New core–periphery internal labour markets are emerging and they are highly gendered. Women academics still constitute 51 per cent of employees below lecturer, are employed at lower levels and are promoted more slowly. Yet there is no evidence for 'the pipeline fallacy' that women's slow ascent will produce a critical mass of women in leadership that will make workplace cultures family friendly, as women academics still speak of the exclusionary and chilly cultures of the academy (Allen and Castleman 2001, Currie and Thiele 2001). So while some women are being groomed for corporate roles, we are, as Erica McWilliam (2000) comments, learning how to laugh out loud within the academy in a 'orderly manner' while striving to get a competitive edge. Yet there is little valuing of difference or redistribution of resources and power.

Epistemologically, feminists have debated how different theoretical paradigms inform strategic political action. Key issues have been about representation, and the struggle between essentialist and universalising notions of female and male identity, on the one hand, and multiple feminisms concerned with deconstruction and specificity, on the other (Tsolidis 1996, p. 273). Feminists struggle with who can speak for whom and under what conditions, as post-colonial, black and indigenous feminists have challenged white middle-class feminists' voices representing all women. Critical voices about the political paralysis arising from postmodernism's popularity have been raised, the linguistic turn being perceived as both seductive and dangerous. Ironically, the post-structuralist foregrounding of identity, subjectivity and the local during the 1990s temporarily allowed slippage away from materialist analyses globally at a time when restructuring globally produced an increased polarisation of wealth along east–west; north–south; rural–urban lines, differentially inflected by race, class, ethnicity and gender. The postmodernist turn away from grand narratives led to a reluctance about feminist theorising about humanity, racial division, the class struggle and women as a class.

Second, postmodernist feminist intellectuals are also criticised for their emphasis on the surveillance capabilities of new forms of governance and disciplinary technologies of pedagogical practice, and 'their reluctance to identify sources of power and pin down explanations, making strategic thinking difficult and leading to a refusal to adopt a position of political authority (intellectual at the center) on ethical grounds' (Fendler 1999, p. 184). Their ethical position is one of 'pessimistic activism'.

Third, many black feminists question the substitution of the modernist politics of identity with the postmodernist politics of difference. Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 42), a black American feminist academic, suggests that, while postmodernism eschews essentialist notions of culture and identity through a sociology of difference, it also rejects ethical positions and therefore eschews social policy recommendations that may advance particular truth claims. She points to the difference between what postmodernism 'says and what it does', targeting white feminist academics.

> Social theories of difference deployed by intellectuals who are privileged within hierarchical power relations of race, class and gender may operate quite differently than comparable theories forwarded either by intellectuals emerging from the centres of oppressed groups or by those in outsider-within locations (black feminists within the academy). (Collins 2000, p. 42)

Collins (2000, p. 61) sees difference as being commodified, marketed, consumed and eradicated in ways that authenticate essential difference associated with group

differences of race, ethnicity, gender, economic class and sexuality, stripping it of a political meaning but reformulating it as a matter of style. Chandra Mohanty (1989, p. 181) argues that difference is being seen as a 'benign variation in the discourse of diversity' rather than 'conflict, struggle or the threat of disruption ... a harmonious empty pluralism'. Feminist postmodern critiques, they suggest, have become academic ones, epistemic and not political, simultaneously 'legitimating the academic and emptying out the more political and worldly substance' without decentring the privileging of science and technology (Collins 2000, p. 50).

In Australia, Aileen Moreton-Robinson in her brilliant book *Talkin' up to the White Woman,* criticises white, middle-class feminism from an indigenous post-colonial feminist perspective. She likewise argues that the discourses about difference are still underpinned by a 'deracialised but gendered universal subject' and therefore not particularly helpful (Moreton-Robinson 2000, p. xi). 'Difference has become the marker of that which is not the same, in which whiteness as race, as privilege, as a social construction is not interrogated as a "difference" within feminist political practice and theory' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, p. xviii). She continues to work with the notion of difference, but sees it not a group attribute but a construction of relations between groups and their interactions with institutions, an 'ongoing interactional accomplishment' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, p. 56). Black, indigenous and post-colonial feminists caution white feminists to recognise that, while we refuse to be colonisers, we as white women still benefit from the processes of colonisation, while claiming solidarity with the colonised.

Feminists have therefore, through recognition of and reflection on difference amongst women and feminisms, constantly problematised what theory means for practice. Martha Nussbaum (1998) argues that the central dilemma for feminism is the tension between universalism (women as a class) and cultural relativism (specificity of women's experiences) and how we progress in terms of a practical politics. Feminists are struggling with this dilemma theoretically and politically. Black and indigenous feminists see the substitution of a politics of identity with a politics of difference as a loss for those who seek to be named as black and indigenous women. Post-structuralist feminists argue that the 'master's tools' can be appropriated to provide alternative powerful explanatory schema while the politics of difference can provide realistic strategic possibilities. Habermasian feminists are focusing on communicative competence and dimensions of agency. Fraser (1997) has promoted critical thinking about the politics of recognition and redistribution, which has significant practical applications in education, while others are working through theories of deliberative democracy in global contexts. Moreton-Robinson, as an indigenous feminist, works with post-structuralism and notions of agency and subjectivity, arguing we need to consciously manage our subjectivities in particular contexts in which we also may not

be dominant. In that sense, there is a shared normative and political project amongst feminisms on social justice and equity. To negotiate the theoretical and practical terrain requires a level of reflexivity therefore about how we position ourselves in this context and how we theorise and enact politics.

But what of relations between the academic and social action? Siraj-Blatchford (1995, p. 205) argues that black intellectuals who are outsiders inside the academy need to adopt a 'committed perspective' to research, acting as organic rather than traditional intellectuals. This means challenging traditional intellectuals and approaches to research within the academy as well as assuming a public role. For white feminist academics, it is about recognising we are both Gramsci's 'traditional intellectual' from the perspective of black or indigenous feminists, whose role is depicted by Edward Said (2001, online) as 'not to lead but to consolidate the government's policy', and also Gramsci's 'organic intellectual' committed to the interests of an oppressed group, and that we will simultaneously feel and act accordingly (Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971). On both counts, being an organic intellectual is not just about the intrinsic nature of intellectual activity but is also about the social function of intellectuals as producers of knowledge. Just as traditional intellectuals can no longer assume a position of 'being independent, autonomous and endowed with a character of their own' (Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971, p. 8), organic intellectuals have a role in influencing traditional intellectual epistemologies, as white feminists and now black and indigenous intellectuals are doing as outsiders-inside the academy. These feminist debates explicating an ongoing tension between the epistemological and the political are central to the role of the public intellectual. Tensions between the epistemological and the political, between universalism and relativism, between idealism in the long term and practical politics in the short term, are not just feminist issues but questions central to the future of the university and public intellectuals. Feminist academics seek to effect change in a specific research field and in the broader academic field, and are committed to their particular public, an imagined community.

But is there a future for such agency in the corporate university? Is the corporate university creating untenable and untenurable conditions for public intellectuals? Will the demise of the public intellectual see the demise of the university? And if so, who will prove critical judgements? Space for intellectual debate relies upon the extent to which the postmodern university can claim a distinctive position relative to other providers of professional training and research now it is no longer the site of reason and enlightenment. There are numerous dimensions to this repositioning.

First, universities have to distinguish themselves in terms of modernist claims of intellectual rigour based on peer review and ethical behaviours in teaching and research. But, equally importantly, they must also make criticality central to their

relationships within the academy and with their various publics. Barnett (1997) sees criticality as providing the necessary 'leverage' to reinvigorate academic disciplinary authority to educate students entering the professions in the type of reflexive and critical thinking that is central to knowledge-based societies. To 'profess' is not merely about interaction with clients but 'it should embrace the idea of speaking out on one's subject' (Barnett 1997, p. 133). Professionals have a critical role to engage with society and the client as 'professional knowledge is "critique-in-action"' (Barnett 1997, p. 139). Criticality, he suggests, can work simultaneously within and against performativity. It can both yield the desired outcomes within a knowledge-based economy because it provides a competitive edge and even efficiencies, and also promote for universities a sense of ethics and a strong public role. In teacher education, for example, the formation of a profession from this perspective must incorporate four dimensions: a broad commitment to being a public advocate for the profession and the social good; a contribution to the development of the knowledge base and practice of the profession; adherence to professional and ethical standards set by and for the profession, and accountability to the profession, students, parents/carers, employers and the wider community; and being competent and knowledgeable about subject matter. This notion of critical professionality may require us to promote a 'social science' of education that moves away from specialisms that have led to fragmentation of the field and return to thinking about ourselves as organic intellectuals, where we come to know the field of education and not just our disciplinary field.

Second, the university has to become a key site of reflexivity, dissent and dialogue, and this requires recognising difference within itself substantively and not just as a performative exercise mobilised through symbolic discourses about cultural diversity and internationalisation.

Finally, the university has to be a key actor in the public sphere and enhance the democratisation of knowledge, to 'mediate the mode of knowledge, and the articulation of cultural models and institutional innovation' (Delanty 2001, p. 9).

Reasoned utopianism: the space between sociologistic resignation and utopian voluntarism

I have argued for the existence of the academic as a public intellectual, albeit a more reflexive one, and for the potential for global networks of 'committed academics', and conceded a temporary reprieve for the corporate university. But is the university the only place where education, intellectual inquiry and critique, professional training and technology come together and where reflexivity, criticality and activism/advocacy

can be encouraged through a range of practices in policy research, production, evaluation, and critique? What role can professional voluntarist associations such as the Australian Association of Research in Education (AARE) play? As an association, a community of practice with a collective interest in educational research, how can we engage both with 'the public', our various imagined communities, and the *real politik* of government at a time when the legitimacy of both government and the professions is at stake. Has the role of this educational research organisation changed since Professor Bill Connell put the motion for the formation of AARE in 1969, defining its three functions as being 'a forum for discussion, a pressure group acting for the furtherance of educational research, and a clearing house for research' (Bessant and Holbrook 1995, p. 38).

AARE has been contemplating its functions with regard to its individual members, its institutional role and its public commitments. Some of the tensions are to:

- protect the intellectual property of its members at a time when concentration of knowledge management is in the hands of government, publishing companies, and industry, which exacerbates the need to democratise knowledge to promote a new sense of 'the public sphere';

- maintain a strong institutional base as a peak national lobby group for the profession without being coopted into a policy service rather than policy critique role;

- promote what is distinctive about Australian research (as the European Educational Research Association is promoting European educational research) while recognising that AARE membership has increased regional membership from South Africa, Asia, South East Asia and Singapore;

- provide a range of membership services as a client-based organisation while playing a public advocacy role as a professional association;

- attract the next generation of researchers as national educational research capacities and research training are under threat.

One strategy we as a professional organisation can undertake is to reinvigorate the social sciences and humanities in terms of investigating social capital building capacities of universities, to indicate how social science provides broad-based public goods and contributes to longer term economic capacity, society and culture (Marginson 2001, pp. 14–16). This could mean developing a broader range of social indicators in education that foreground equity and social effects similar to, for example, the social development indicators developed by Martha Nussbaum (1998) and used in UNESCO reports to measure the progress of gender equality.

Another strategy from a policy critique rather than policy service perspective, is to work through the limitations of instrumentalism as a basis for the research–policy relationship. The social sciences and humanities facilitate innovation and technological change through analytical and community skills, and organisational, legal and economic frameworks. Practical outcomes can only be produced when 'the practical' is located within a needs and rights oriented framework and a sophisticated sense of what constitutes the 'public good' (Nussbaum 1998). In terms of a practical politics, this may mean AARE seeks new alliances nationally and internationally across the fields of the social sciences and humanities, and connections with other research organisations, to change the dominant paradigm of Australian universities, as well as international networks.

A third strategy would be to take seriously the desire to inform the public and work with/against the media. Journalists are both dependent on academics as sources but are also gatekeepers of the way in which educational research is represented to the public. Pat Thomson (2002) suggests we need to shape the debates proactively and provide an alternative source of research (e.g. websites) that identifies education experts and debates. This suits journalistic predispositions towards conflict and they do not possess the academic disposition to look at a range of sites. The British Educational Research Association (2001) has redeveloped its reviews of research to include both academic and professional reviews to make research more accessible. The Australian Academy of the Humanities has developed a portal into digital research – the Australian e-Humanities Gateway – a communication clearing house.

I have argued that we as educational researchers have to work within these changing conditions of constraint of the corporate university more reflexively, collaboratively, critically and with commitment, to realise the obligations that go with academic freedoms, to get beyond the safety of our disciplines, and to consider our relations with our various public(s). Perhaps we need a new type of educational sociology, one of 'radical change' rather than 'regulation', one that 'focuses upon the visionary and Utopian, in that it looks towards potentiality as much as actuality, it is concerned with what is possible rather than what is, with alternatives rather than acceptance of the status quo' (Siraj-Blatchford 1995, p. 211). Bourdieu (1996, p. 196) suggests we need to move beyond 'academic adolescence' where revolt and subversion are based on idealism, and instead to work for 'scientific and political realism that can locate real points of application for responsible action' – a reasoned utopianism that is in the space between sociologistic resignation and utopian voluntarism. This form of reason would not be afraid to speak of commitment, to advocate social justice, to invest in more than one's self-interest and self-promotion, to realise that part of our role as intellectuals is to continue to imagine that we do belong to a 'public' and that educational research can enhance the 'public good'. We still need intellectual ideas as

well as practical applications in order to promote education's capacity to provide educational opportunities for all and not just a few. For those of us who are concerned about social justice and policy activism, we need to remain 'visionary opportunists' who practice 'an ethics of pragmatism' (Yeatman 1998, pp. 12–14).

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Notes

[1] Postmodernism describes the epistemological approaches that inform the material, social and historical conditions of postmodernity.

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