

A Lesson to be Learned

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ABSTRACT

This brief essay departs from the ascertainment that, according to official agencies and epidemiologists, the COVID-19 pandemic was preventable, to outline the current research regime in so-called 'knowledge societies'. It argues that the state and business control of universities, which in Europe has been particularly promoted by the EU, as well as the overwhelming emphasis on the inventions of the 'fourth industrial revolution', have displaced research that addresses the common good.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, knowledge society, fourth industrial revolution, academic autonomy

A Preventable Pandemic

Those who were in the position to know, they knew. The Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (co-convened by WHO and the World Bank) knew: in their last annual report, published just before the outbreak of the plague, they underlined that investments in vaccine development and broad spectrum antiviral drugs were inadequate, in the face of a high risk for epidemics or pandemics that would cause loss of life, upset economies and bring about social chaos (GPMB, 2019). The American government knew: in 2017, the Pentagon warned that a 'novel respiratory disease' could 'quickly evolve into a multinational health crisis that causes millions to suffer' (Klippenstein, 2020). The EU knew, but 'industry lobby groups have managed to convince the European Commission to let the private sector decide how very large amounts of public research funding should be used' (CEO, 2020). Billionaire-run philanthropic foundations knew, but 'the

investments that could have been done ... were not made', because there was 'no private sector incentive for something uncertain like this' (Gates, 2020). Indeed, pharmaceutical companies also knew, but, over the last twenty years, they sat on vaccine research results, because investing in face creams, drugs that maintain chronic diseases, marketing, and stock buybacks are where the big profits lie, not in preventing pandemics (Lawson, 2020). As Michael Osterholm (2020), the acknowledged infectious disease epidemiologist, said, if a vaccine was prepared right after the SARS epidemic of 2003, today half of the victims of COVID-19 could have been rescued, even if the two coronaviruses are not exactly of the same strain. Richard Horton (2020), editor of *The Lancet*, confirmed that the 'warnings of doctors and scientists were ignored, with fatal results', and that 'coronavirus is the greatest global science policy failure in a generation'.

Lo and behold, the much celebrated 'knowledge societies', in which the utilization of scientific knowledge to the benefit of public health is by no means self-evident. It could not be otherwise, since the 'new era of knowledge' that countries around the world, and especially the European Union, ecstatically declared, since the 1990s, meant nothing but that university research must be subjected to the investment priorities of business enterprises; and that innovation must be orientated predominantly towards enhancing technologies of social control and consumption, under the 'fourth industrial revolution'. The text delineates these two characteristic features of so-called 'knowledge societies' that, as it is argued, have displaced independent research and, for that matter, research that serves the common good.

The Failure of 'Knowledge' Societies

Since 2000, universities in Europe have been formally brought into what the EU called a 'knowledge industry', under the direct guidance of big enterprises that largely defined the 'modernization agenda' for higher education. The European Council pronounced 'the role of universities [...] as a main contribution to Europe's competitiveness and the need for closer cooperation between academia and the world of enterprise' (EC, 2007a). The 'European Research Area' set as its main aim 'to ensure "knowledge transfer", namely exploitation of research produced in universities by businesses and industry' (EC, 2007b).

To accomplish this aim, the EU and governments around the continent initiated a series of reforms intended to abolish the fragments of academic autonomy that universities in Europe used to have, targeting primarily their form of governance. European universities have been turned into business-like organizations led by appointed managers and operating with cost-benefit and profit-seeking criteria. Established divisions in faculties, departments, laboratories and administrative units – where academics traditionally had a say – have been replaced by 'management

systems' that have reduced scholars to 'human resources'. Researchers are now subject to assessment by indicators such as: 'research outputs per academic staff', 'external research income', 'number and percentage of competitive grants won', 'commissioned reports', 'consultancy contracts', 'number of collaborations and partnerships', and similar gauges that force them to shape their knowledge and research according to the desires of all kinds of sponsors.

Under these European-wide university reforms, management-based governance has dissolved the academic community by turning scholars into methodically controlled 'knowledge workers', with no say for the affairs of their institution. The management system promoted across Europe has altered the relation between the academic staff and the administration within the university: now, academics are being fully subjected to a voluminous administration, which exercises (and is subject to) thorough surveillance through digital databases. Moreover, management has exposed scientific staff to market relations, by involving business agents in governance, removing employment security from researchers, and forcing them to make their interests and knowledge available for purchase.

Indeed, for about three decades now, initially in the UK and then around Europe, universities have been stripped of the limited academic autonomy they used to have, disabling scholars from deciding, not only about the governance of their institution, but also about their research and even their teaching. They are forced to 'generate income' or 'buy their salaries' by selling research results to businesses or state agencies. The consequences of obliging academics to sell their research are obvious in natural sciences: As Stephanie Pain, associate editor of *New Scientist*, wrote already back in the 1990s. ' . . . where research was once mostly neutral, it now has an array of paymasters to please. In place of impartiality, research results are being discreetly managed and massaged, or even locked away if they don't serve the right interests. Patronage rarely comes without strings attached'. In humanities and social sciences, scholars must conform, too, to the agendas and pursuits of private or public agencies and research funds at the expense of their personal intellectual interests. Academics are required to succumb, and, in fact, they have, to the aims and the bureaucratic rules of external agencies (e.g., applications, budgeting, anticipation of outcomes, deadlines, procedures of approval or rejection, reporting to sponsors etc.), rather to be accountable to their community and the public. Thereby, scholars have been institutionally obstructed from creating knowledge following their own intellectual interests and judgement and they are obliged to produce knowledge which is, in an unprecedented manner, both marketized and bureaucratized.

Indeed, university knowledge is now subject to procedures imposed by managers and funding agencies, industrialized by the global publication system, degraded as a mere product listed by automated software tools that

measure the productivity of academics, and absorbed by massive production. In fact, the neoliberal policies of the last three decades have not merely sought to bring knowledge under the effective control of the state and capitalist economy, but literally to destroy it, as quest for the truth, critique, and rational debate. Therefore, the neoliberal university is not exempt from the truth decay that we have been witnessing in the public space over the last decades. It is one of its main actors.

The second feature of the current knowledge production regime is the so-called ‘fourth industrial revolution’ (i.e. synergy amongst information technology, artificial intelligence, robotics, genetics, nanotechnology and neuroscience), whose rapid progress is promising to improve everyday life. However, the inventions announced, every now and then, hardly convince that this is indeed the priority: robotization across production and service sectors threatening to raise unemployment and underemployment; underwater nuclear-armed drones, soldiers who can activate military equipment through neural messages, and killer-robots; predictive policing; face recognition and collection of biometric data through cameras and policemen’s eyeglasses; lip-reading and emotion detection devices; ‘smart cities’ (i.e. urban areas equipped to collect data from citizens through sensors in lamp posts, street cameras, and mobile devices); brain implants and mind-reading helmets, connected with AI devices, that decipher thoughts from neural activity; AI debaters and invincible chess players; ‘virtual assistants’ that replace peer or parental advice and record private conversations; distortion of photographic and video material through ‘face-apps’ and ‘deepfake’ software; the Internet of Things (IoT) which connects appliances in order to constantly renew consumables; social-media platforms exposing and selling off details of private lives; animes, holograms, and sex robots. Apparently, instead of (or as) the general improvement of society, what the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ is mostly about is the reinforcement of economic and biopolitical controls, intense competition on military might, perpetual and pervasive surveillance, the algorithmization of judgement and conduct, and the turning of human life into data.

Thus, ironically, while countries around the world, with almost universal education and high-tech economies, have been declaring themselves as ‘knowledge societies’, scientific knowledge, as rational reflection and utilization of empirical results for the common good, has been given miniscule attention – as the pandemic is testifying and, even more, the unfolding environmental destruction. Thus, ‘knowledge societies’ have come to remind the Orwellian Oceania, where ‘... there was no vocabulary expressing the function of Science as a habit of mind, or a method of thought, irrespective of its particular branches’, and where ‘... technological progress only happens when its products can in some way be used for the diminution of human liberty’ (Orwell, 1949).

It is not surprising, then, why ‘knowledge societies’ are running now to avert the destruction, while they had the capacity to prevent it. Guided by globalized capitalism, both authoritarian and liberal societies have displaced free scientific thinking and true innovation and have focused on inventions that constantly expand, social control, and consumption of all sorts of gadgets, always in the name of progress and economic development.

Re-establishing the University

It is time for rethinking, as it is commonly, and rightly so, being said, about ‘the next day’, when the world makes it through this plague, and its yet unknown toll in lives and suffering. The next day should include the freeing of research and knowledge from the grip of businesses and the state (including the inter-state EU), which has been acting unabashedly in their service over three decades of neoliberal policymaking. The university must become again university, in accordance to its valuable European tradition of academic autonomy, which, however, has very little been realized. Scholars should reassume their intellectual, educational, and decision-making roles, and students should become again, from customers and consumers of knowledge, integral members of the academic community. Researchers should be giving account to this community, and, by extension, to the public, not to all sorts of commercial interests, and state bureaucracies. The state’s role should be to support free research, which is the only kind of research that serves the common good.

But most importantly ‘the next day’ should include the emancipation of societies from the perception that progress and development are equivalent to enhancing technologies of consumption, and control, and expanding perpetually human domination on nature, a consequence of which is also this pandemic (see Vidal, 2020; Weston, 2020). There are certainly good reasons to do so. Technologies of surveillance and control, which are now welcome to constrain the spread of the disease, could acquire a new legitimation basis and establish themselves even further, in the name of ‘public health’. Above all, of course, if the domination of societies on nature continues, the destruction of the global ecosystem, the mass extinction of fauna and flora, and the imminent climate catastrophe will render the very concept of public health meaningless.

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Author Bio

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