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# **Social Epistemology Special Issue on Neoliberalism, Technocracy and Higher Education**

## **Editors' Introduction**

**Justin Cruickshank and Ross Abbinnett**

This special issue of *Social Epistemology* has its origin in two symposia organised by the *Contemporary Philosophy of Technology Research Group* at the University of Birmingham (UK). These were 'The Digital University in a Neoliberal Age' in November 2017 and 'The Neoliberal Imagination' in February 2018. The articles published here explore the relationship between neoliberalism, technocracy and technology, with a special but not exclusive focus on universities, which are open to contestation concerning their role in the public sphere and the politics of knowledge production. Where universities are discussed, English higher education is focused on, because this is undergoing an intense audit-driven neoliberal re-engineering. English higher education is an outlier in Europe to the extent to which it has undergone marketisation, with top-down reforms imposed by the supposedly rolled back, less-interventionist neoliberal state (Shattock 2019). Central to these are state-imposed technocratic audit regimes which are used to provide 'objective' data on 'performance', which has, always already, to be 'excellent' (see Readings' 1997 classic critique of the vacuity of the notion of 'excellence'). Before briefly introducing each article, we will situate the concerns mentioned above in the context of a social epistemological critique of knowledge production.

The recent 'Sokal Squared' hoax and its fallout (Mangan 2019), together with the publication of Errol Morris' (2018) *The Ashtray* (a critique of Kuhn's 'social' and 'relativist' account of knowledge production), shows that the 'science wars' are not quite over yet. (See also the exchange between Martin 2019 and Sokal 2019 in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, and

Fuller's (2002, 2003) argument that Kuhn was an intellectual conservative, rather than a relativist critic of science.) This is despite the polemical exchanges in the 1990s doing nothing to change either side's opinion, with the attempt at reconciliation by Labinger and Collins (2001) having no lasting effect. The consensus remains in Anglo-American philosophy that while there is a philosophy of knowledge there can only be a sociology of error. This is because any account of the social mediation of knowledge is taken to entail relativism. As Gadamer (2013) may have put it, there was no fusion of horizons, but only a cementing of positions, because both sides – ironically both for the postmodernist sceptics and the scientists who accept that science is fallible – took their positions as certain. Neither side saw the inherent limits of their own position and the failure to recognise such finitude resulted in each side taking the epistemic (and political-ethical) authority of their position as unquestionable. As Fuller (1999) argued though, a scientific approach to knowledge, including scientific knowledge, ought to consider all the factors impacting on the creation of that knowledge. A naïve approach to science becomes scientism, that is, the fetishism of science, rather than a scientific approach to reality which includes the social – institutional production of scientific knowledge. One does not have to embrace postmodern relativism, or any form of relativism or scepticism, to recognise the socio-political mediation of knowledge produced in various institutions and intellectual-cultural contexts. Science and technology studies provides useful empirical work on the social-institutional production of scientific knowledge and social epistemology provides useful work on the intellectual, socio-political and cultural traditions that the philosophical and conceptual framings of knowledge production, including science, hail from.

Science as scientism is hermetic, in the sense that science as an exemplar of human rationality is sealed off from the full study of its own objective knowledge production with social factors ranging from intellectual to institutional and financial factors being taken to corrupt the domain of pure knowledge (for a defence of some forms of scientism, see Mizrahi 2017). While those tending to scientism were hermetic and hostile to what could be seen by them as the endorsement of epistemically corrupting social factors with social or sociological imperialism, one social science had

a wing seeking to dominate the other social sciences, in the name of science. Some of those arguing for economics to be treated as an epistemic exemplar because it is held to be scientific, unlike the other social sciences, hold that all social scientific explanations should be based on rational choice assumptions, which allow for predictability and thus generalisable explanations. Economics can become an imperialistic discipline. Indeed, one could hold that all behaviour, including family and relationship oriented 'emotional' behaviour is to be explained solely in terms of utility-maximising cost-benefit analysis as Gary Becker (1978) famously did. Now epistemically corrupting social factors would no longer be a threat to science as an exemplar of rationality because social factors would be translated into economic factors amenable to scientific explanation. Alternatively, some, such as Charles Murray, turn to biology to seek a 'scientific' explanation of social factors, and use this to try to justify the argument that socio-economic inequality reflects genetic differences (for a discussion of this see Cruickshank 2017).

While economic imperialism in the name of science did not succeed in the social sciences, economics as the science of 'objective' market forces did come to dominate politics. Concerns over economic efficiency replaced concerns with politics as the pursuit of the good society seeking social justice, with such justice perceived in terms of egalitarian re-distributive policies correcting market failings, rather than in terms of reducing social justice to economic efficiency. The rise of neoliberal political economy saw the shift from politics being a science of correcting market failures, to economics being a science of correcting political failures, by limiting the role of politics as much as possible to allow 'free markets' to self-correct (Hay 2007). Politics came to be seen as a normatively dominated pursuit of the socially just society that clashed with economic reality (Hay 2007). Politics had to be based on an objective understanding of objective market forces rather than being corrupted by social factors in the form of reformist normative commitments. The outcome of this was that politics, in the form of state interventionism, had to be radically limited, and if any post social democratic reformist motivations were retained, they had to be defined to fit market principles (Davies 2016). The good society was the technocratic efficient society based on the science of free

market economics. Politics became refashioned to fit the science of economics, with (instrumental) rationality replacing normatively inspired approaches based on conceptions of a better society. For New Labour, in the UK, this meant using audits in place of the price mechanism to extend the neoliberal market reform of the public sector (Davies 2016).

Neoliberalism is presented as a post-expert technocracy, in the sense that top-down social planners are replaced by decentred supposedly objective market forces, knowable through the price signal, or audit proxies, with these furnishing knowledge that is presented as not being corrupted by social factors such as planners' normative commitments. Expert technocratic economic-scientists can explain how these forces work so as to reduce the role and ambition of politics, with audits seeking to replicate markets. Experts cannot expand the role of politics to impose social reforms to situations misperceived normatively as socio-economic problems, rather than as the acceptable outcome of market forces which self-correct.

These developments can be explained in terms of social factors such as the intellectual development of disciplines and institutional power-politics, together with an analysis of how post-Enlightenment societies increasingly came to view knowledge production in an instrumental way, as just a means to manipulate reality to some advantage. More than this though, the rise of neoliberal political economy has to be linked to the intellectual-political campaigning of the Mont Pèlerin 'neoliberal thought collective', which included Hayek, and the increasing power of corporate capital over the state (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009).

So, there is a conflation of anti-statism and anti-normative politics, in the name of letting objective market forces operate 'naturally' with no detrimental meddling stemming from epistemically corrupting social factors. Yet neoliberalism is a statist project, with markets being seen as needing to be made by states, rather than being expressions of unfettered human nature, and

regulated by states with a view to protecting the interests of the most important economic actors, namely corporate capital (Davies 2014; Harvey 2005; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Neoliberalism is very much a statist project and one driven by social factors in the form of normative commitments to a possessive individualist ideology that sees any form of collectivism as a misguided understanding of human nature.

While markets are held to serve individuals in the rhetoric of neoliberalism and the models constructed by economists, the expectation and reality became that of individuals serving the market. In reality, the market was neither an objective means to serve rational-choice individuals, nor an objective force akin to natural forces requiring adaptation, but a political-social product, to which individuals were required to adapt to in terms of behaviour and normative commitments. Individuals are meant to reshape their behaviour and motivations to adapt to the market, presented by the state not as a political product, but as a set of objective forces.

Moreover, neoliberalism, despite its individualist rhetoric about liberating individuals from bureaucracy and the failed top-down reforms interventionist / social democratic states imposed, is statist not just in the way it politically engineers the operation of market forces, but in terms of the oppressive use of state power. Neoliberalism has a twofold authoritarian aspect. First, state power is exercised in a punitive way against groups normatively perceived by the state as minorities open to intensified exploitation and exemplary demonstrations of state repressive power (see for instance Wacquant (2014), who argues that the neoliberal state is liberal at the top and punitive at the bottom). Second, the state seeks to ensure than wide ranging public dialogue in a thriving democratic culture, which could hold elites to account, is replaced by individuals being motivated by the desire to adapt to market forces, with normative concerns pertaining to social justice and democracy as ends in themselves being seen as irrelevant, failed anachronisms (Davies 2016). Neoliberalism can thus be described as a post-expert technocracy with authoritarian aspects to it.

Higher education is of central importance in understanding neoliberal technocracy. Higher education is part of the public sector in the UK and the public sector has been undergoing extensive neoliberal reform, based on marketization, with the use of state-controlled audit data in lieu of the price signal in many cases. Increased ‘performance’ as measured by metrics is a key management goal in the public sector. The current changes to English higher education illustrate this, but higher education is central to an understanding of neoliberalism because, more than this, it is a contested site. Universities could present knowledge and learning as normatively desirable ends in themselves and also as a means to help produce a more vibrant public culture of democratic dialogue. This would be an epistemic threat to neoliberalism though and would be regarded as a waste of resources. Universities are being subject to technocratic neoliberal re-engineering, as sites of knowledge and self-production, to produce more ‘useful’ knowledge and graduates. Research is to be of use to the national corporate economy and graduates are not only to invest in human capital to make themselves useful to corporate employers but are to see knowledge in an instrumental, marketised way. Knowledge is to be perceived as an external ‘thing’ to be used to help adapt to objective market forces, with consumption of that thing steered at least in part by audit data, signalling the objective worth of a degree in the higher education market.

The articles in this special issue of *Social Epistemology* assess the development of this neoliberal technocracy. Robert Antonio’s ‘Ethnocracial Populism: An Alternative to Neoliberal Globalization’ explores the authoritarian statism of neoliberalism. For Antonio, neoliberalism is engaged in a process of de-democratisation intensified by the development of right-wing populism. In making his case, Antonio’s contrasts the work of Hayek and Schmitt on the one hand, and Dewey and Polanyi on the other, over their competing conceptions of the public sphere, democracy and knowledge. Richard Hall’s ‘On Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Poetic Epistemology’ explores the impact of authoritarian neoliberalism on higher education and the potential to challenge this. Hall argues that a technocratic regime of audit culture is used to justify the reforms to English higher

education in terms of increasing performance, with this entailing more emphasis on economic usefulness and the intensified exploitation of staff. As an alternative to this, Hall turns to a ‘poetic epistemology’ which reconceptualises the role of knowledge and its potential for democratic and egalitarian changes. Hall draws on the work of Audre Lorde to argue that knowledge production has to be conceptualised as a non-technocratic and non-instrumental social process that entails emotions and contexts. Knowledge and selfhood develop together and authoritarian neoliberal technocracy seeks to occlude this to create a world of isolated competing individuals viewing knowledge as a thing and not as part of who they and others are. Epistemology is very much a social and political matter.

John Holmwood and Chaime Marcuello-Servós, in their article ‘Challenges to Public Universities: Digitalisation, Commodification and Precarity’, discuss the social and epistemological challenges facing ‘bundled universities’, which seek to provide a variety of functions, including educating people for democratic citizenship in an active public sphere. They argue that marketization is pushing towards an unbundling of functions and towards an emphasis on the provision of human capital and economically useful knowledge by an increasingly surveilled and casualised workforce, with audit culture being central to this. The opening up of social reproduction and the democratisation of the conditions of knowledge production, that is, the development of a public university system serving the public good of creating an educated and critical public, sought by the bundled universities, is being reversed. Democracy is being undermined by marketization and its technical and technocratic mediation via digital audit culture which is presented as non-normative and neutral. One consequence of the hollowing out of the public sphere by the undermining of public universities is the rise of authoritarian populism as some people misperceive the causes of intensified inequality and insecurity.

Elio di Muccio, in his article ‘Core HR in British Higher Education: For a Technological Single Source and Version of the Truth?’, explores the use of ‘core technologies’ which use digital technology to subject staff to real time digital-dashboard surveillance. Rather than have staff feel

subjected to panoptic-like surveillance and control, core technologies are used to make staff feel as if they have increased control over the work process by having increased engagement with the technology used to monitor this. In place of stifling bureaucracy and incompetent lower level management, there is digital transparency. Staff become co-opted into a management epistemology based on 'horizontal alignment', with all staff being responsible for the 'delivery' of an organisation's 'strategic objectives'. In this context, work 'silos' are undermined and people are expected to work in generalist teams to meet whatever demands are placed upon them. Authoritarian management hierarchy is replaced by a new form of hierarchy which can increase insecurity and stress as people face technocratic digital real-time team-based transparency regimes. Poor lower-level managers can be exposed but the pressure to 'deliver' excellence 'performance' is never-ending and work-outcomes are always visible to senior managers. These changes will impact upon the academic workforce as much as the administrative and support staff workforces. In response to this, a new generalist approach to union organising is needed, which moves away from the defence of academic privilege. All university workers need to unite to recognise their shared exploitation.

Justin Cruickshank, in 'Economic Freedom and the Harm of Adaptation: On Gadamer, Authoritarian Technocracy and the Re-Engineering of English Higher Education', discusses the current changes to English higher education, which include new audit regimes and a re-structuring of the Research Councils. These are criticised by drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy of 'Being'. This philosophy stresses the importance of dialogue based on a recognition of finitude leading to an understanding of others *qua* others, and the importance of higher education, as envisaged by Humboldt, in facilitating the development of a public sphere defined by informed critical discussion. Cruickshank argues that from a Gadamerian perspective the recent neoliberal re-engineering of higher education is authoritarian in implication, because it intensifies a longer standing tendency towards making people adapt to state-imposed requirements for acceptable performance. These push people to become 'functionaries' rather than cultivated and critically minded beings

engaged in dialogue in the public sphere to hold elites to account. In Gadamerian terms, people's 'Being' is truncated as well as the democratic means to use knowledge to criticise elites.

These moves to a technocratic audit regime, enhanced by digital technology, with intensifying exploitation, are justified in terms of audit data being objective proxies for market forces and an analysis of the language used in official documents can expose the normative commitments motivating the imposition of audit regimes on English higher education. Liz Morrish, in her article 'The Accident of Accessibility: How the Data of the TEF Creates Neoliberal Subjects', undertakes a detailed analysis of the Government's White Paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' (2016). This was used to justify the creation and imposition of the new Teaching Excellence Framework (now renamed as the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework) or 'TEF'; alongside the existing Research Excellence Framework (REF) and imposition of the new Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). Morrish situates the argument for the TEF in terms of the continuing neoliberal reforms to higher education. These seek to reposition students as customers of human capital (preferably purchasing STEM degrees to increase their usefulness for the economy) and products of universities acting as manufactories of human capital; and reposition academics as producers of economically useful knowledge and 'satisfied' customers. The White Paper sought to extend the top-down neoliberal reform of higher education by claiming that students were justifiably dissatisfied with the service they received as customers. The answer to this was to liberalise the market of higher education, with more for-profits being encouraged to enter that market, and to furnish customers with more objective information on teaching quality using the TEF. The TEF, was intended, arguably, to steer student-customers towards STEM degrees, as well as increasing market-pressures on all universities. Morrish argues that the readily-available public-digital accessibility of various data sets recording different forms of information on universities meant that the argument for the TEF could utilise this 'accidental accessibility' to provide 'objective evidence' of a problem in the form of poor teaching. The White Paper could draw upon data-sets that just happened to be available, with these being presented as technocratic, 'objective', sets of data on different aspects of higher education,

rather than data-sets that were constructed to be part of a neoliberal project to reform higher education using metrics to measure and increase the pressure for market competition. It was not however a mere contingency, or happy accident, that allowed the White Paper to seek justification using data that just happened to be available. Rather, such data was constructed to meet a prior commitment to neoliberalism. Those data sets were not constructed with the TEF in mind, but as the imposition of the TEF is part of a neoliberal project it could draw usefully on those data sets in seeking technocratic justification. Morrish then undertakes a corpus analysis of the White Paper to explore how supposedly neutral / objective / technocratic terms such as ‘provider’ and ‘excellence’ are driven by neoliberal normative commitments. Thus the term ‘provider’, for instance, has a different semantic import from ‘university’, and can be used to make people think of higher education institutions as market actors engaged in the competitive provision of services for customers, with customer satisfaction being the main goal for such actors.

Ross Abbinnett, in his article ‘The Anthropocene as a Figure of Neoliberal Hegemony’, draws upon Nietzsche, Beck and Stiegler, to analyse the ‘technological messianism’ of late modern technocapitalism. He argues that technology is not just used to increase profits, *pace* Marx, but is part of a broader cultural shift, intensified by the rise of information and communication technologies alongside the rise of neoliberalism. This cultural shift stresses the need for individuals to seek constant improvement and for the future to be perceived in terms of technological means being developed to facilitate this. The rise of concern over the Anthropocene can embody this, with promises of technological fixes being developed in the future for a world shaped by humans detrimentally in the present. Here neoliberal technocracy takes the form of technology being presented as a neutral fix to problems inherent in capitalism, with this stemming from a broader concern with neoliberal drive for ever increasing improvements to performance and control in all domains. If Gadamer saw the benefits of recognising our limits, with finitude promoting solidaristic dialogue and the fusion of horizons with others *qua* others, the ‘neoliberal imagination’ seeks to

eschew all limits in a constant, messianistic drive to increased performance, with the world being a thing to enhance this, rather setting natural limits.

The articles are all critical of neoliberalism and so it is fitting to consider the role of critique in a social investigation into knowledge production under neoliberal cultural and institutional conditions. Jana Bacevic provides this consideration with her article 'Knowing Neoliberalism'. Bacevic draws on Bourdieu, as well as Boltanski and Chiapello, to provide a social analysis of the social production of critical knowledge of neoliberalism, including the discrepancy between radical critique and conservative-instrumental institutional-professional practice by some academics. Such actions should not surprise us, she argues, because notable examples of critics of neoliberalism then taking up management positions and acting as arch neoliberals are only at the end of a scale on which most academics are situated as being complicit in the reproduction of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, she notes, started as a project of critique. It sought radically to reframe the terms of reference of politics and then of society and culture more generally. Academic critique of what is now the neoliberal political-epistemic consensus often fall pray to the 'scholastic fallacy' of presuming that criticism in itself entails an undermining of the object of critique. This is a legacy of ideology-critique, which held that unmasking nefarious ideologies would raise consciousness and create the conditions for radical social and political change. The problem though is that the academic critique of neoliberalism takes place in an institutional setting which can be defined as a neoliberal market: increasingly precarious academics need to 'chase' publications and organise events continually to demonstrate their ability to perform as efficient-productive neoliberal subjects, to gain or retain employment. One way out of this, Bacevic concludes, is to develop a form of knowledge that is political, social, economic and affective: we need to link knowing and relating to the world. We are not transcendent, isolated epistemic subjects, but social and affective beings. With a link to the articles by Hall, Di Muccio and Abbinnett, Bacevic holds that academics need to think, feel and act beyond their (neoliberal-institutional) academic silos by letting environmental problems in their full scale 'sink in', with this promoting action with others to act to remove neoliberalism.

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### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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