



The *perestroika* of academic labour: The neoliberal transformation of higher education and the resurrection of the ‘command economy’

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abstract

This paper compares the changing function and organisation of higher education (HE) under neoliberal reforms, with particular focus on the UK, with those introduced by the Stalin regime in the 1930s and developed in the decades that followed. Although ideologically contrasting, many policies developed to subordinate HE and other state enterprises more directly to the accumulation of capital driven by competition are in many respects strikingly similar in each case. The historical development of each is examined, along with the political economy underlying them, highlighting the most important common features and differences. The proletarianisation of HE in the UK is shown to have encouraged the adoption of ‘spontaneous’ forms of resistance reminiscent of those workers adopted in the USSR to protect themselves from bureaucratic pressure. The paper suggests ways in which these forms of resistance might be incorporated into a more general struggle against the encroachment of neoliberalism.

Introduction

Once quite privileged professionals, university staff in the UK and elsewhere have undergone a dramatic process of proletarianisation over the last thirty years. This has resulted in stagnating and, recently, actually falling levels of pay, a huge growth in student numbers without corresponding increases in funding, and a massive increase in the number of precarious, hourly-paid lecturers. Professional autonomy has rapidly been eroded with the rise of a powerful and centralised institutional apparatus charged with imposing state-defined imperatives and subordinating academic to administrative priorities. Though supported by

rhetorical appeals to private enterprise and deregulation, the structure of higher education (HE) as it emerges from its neoliberal restructuring and reorientation (the Russian *perestroika* captures this conception) bears comparison in fundamental ways with the Soviet command economy in the Stalin period and after. Given that the USSR hardly stands as a beacon of academic freedom and intellectual integrity, there are good reasons to be concerned about this. The differences between the two systems and ideologies are, of course, numerous and obvious. To note just a few: education was considered a public good in the USSR and is treated mainly as a private good in the neoliberal UK; the neoliberal ideology of education as a market and the student as ‘customer’ finds no parallel in the USSR, and, of course, state repression is not something outspoken academics in the UK generally need to worry about. Nevertheless, as I have shown elsewhere (Brandist, 2014), the parallels are striking in a number of areas: the imperative for competition between institutions; the subordination of intellectual endeavor to extrinsic metrics; the lurching of departments and institutions from one target to another heedless of coherence; the need to couch research in terms of impact on the economy and social cohesion; the import of industrial performance management tactics; and the echoing of government slogans by funders (of which the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s invocation of the ‘Big Society’ some years ago is only the most crass example). These parallels are no less instructive than the differences.

While consideration of these parallels helps to bring important contours of the current state of HE into sharper focus, and I make no claim to be the first person to notice many of them (see, for instance, Amann, 2003; Lorentz, 2012; Radice 2008),¹ a more substantial analysis requires us to look more deeply at what lies beneath these similarities. We must consider the political economy underlying the transformation of HE which gives rise to the formal continuities between the Stalinist and neoliberal regimes. We also need a historical analysis of the ways in which the Western and Soviet systems interacted and underwent transformations at the turn of the century. Here we build upon but move beyond the delineation of parallels and seek to identify their underlying, generative mechanisms. The current article thus seeks to advance our understanding of the nature and significance of the neoliberal transformation of HE, but also to suggest ways in which it might effectively be resisted.

While the neoliberal transformation of HE has affected most, if not all, education systems in the world to some extent, the current article concentrates on HE in the UK, as a particularly acute case. It has proven so acute because a) successive

¹ I was, however, unaware of these sources when writing my initial work on the subject.

governments since 1979 have been ideologically committed to the neoliberal transformation of the public sector as a whole; b) they have been able successfully to transmit their demands down the state's vertical hierarchies (albeit in the face of considerable opposition);² and c) the constitutional and structural position of central government in the UK has allowed it to carry out wide-ranging reforms right across the public sector in ways that have not been possible in federal states like Germany or the United States (Pollitt, 2011). The fact that the USSR and UK both displayed centralised constitutional arrangements allows the common features to emerge quite clearly, despite their seemingly contradictory ideological motivations.

The neoliberal transformation of academic labour

HE across much of the world has undergone a significant restructuring and reorientation over the last three decades. It is no longer a novelty to speak of the very idea of the university to be in crisis today as new, commercial imperatives impinge upon, but have yet been unable fully to supplant, continuities with a non-commercial past. As Ruth Barcan (2013) has persuasively argued, the university has acquired a 'palimpsestic' character, with its original identity as a scholarly community being overlain first by a bureaucracy and more recently by a corporate-commercial institution, each with its own logic and demands. The mediaeval idea of a scholarly vocation, the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, has been brought under a corporate form based on knowledge conceived as a commodity. Some disciplines have fared better than others in this new situation, but the maintenance of the 'scholarly paradigm remains symbolically and economically central to the success of the corporation; it is a significant, indeed a key component of the university's "brand value"' (Barcan, 2013: 88). A sharp intensification of labour has resulted from the competition that has been introduced into the system, converging with the underfunded expansion of HE, the proliferation of academic tasks through the addition of bureaucratic and corporate imperatives, the consequences of casualisation as well as the growth of knowledge itself (Barcan, 2013: 93).

The notion of the 'palimpsestic' nature of the university today is helpful in understanding the dilemmas faced by university staff who remain committed to central aspects of the original scholarly 'vocation' that has been hijacked by the corporate form. It tends, however, to understate the essential contradictions that arise, such as the need for corporations to protect their 'brand' from prominent,

² The Thatcher government's defeat of the Miners' Union in the great 1984-5 national strike was undoubtedly a key moment in weakening the workers' movement to a point that it was able to implement such reforms.

but insubordinate academics with outspoken opinions, while at the same time respecting 'academic freedom'.³ Direct censorship and state repression characteristic of the USSR in the Stalin years are fortunately not features of academic life in the bourgeois democracies, but a number of high profile cases have shown outspoken academics to be vulnerable to disciplinary action on precisely these grounds.⁴ It is in the very nature of the commercial pressures that have been brought into university life that it threatens to subordinate all trends and logics that obstruct its expansion. Emergent and residual factors are locked into a struggle that is both irresolvable and insurmountable without wider social transformation. The university 'body', which once sought to encapsulate Humboldtian ideals in an image of classical harmony and proportion, has now become an unstable, unintentionally grotesque phenomenon. Its 'unseemly' openness to economic nourishment becomes ever more obvious and exaggerated as institutions perform endless contortions to secure funds and to avoid complete dismemberment. Meanwhile, the requirement that academic staff become beings that can 'embody' the demands of each palimpsestic 'layer' has led to longer working hours, multitasking, increased levels of stress and a multitude of consequent pathologies.

Increasing dislocation of staff from, and cynicism towards, such managerialism is evident throughout the system, but this does not directly undermine the effectiveness of the administration in directing researchers into what may be perceived as 'safe' projects likely to yield publications in the most prestigious journals. Indeed, this 'cultural revolution' spawns some new cadres who, motivated by career considerations, step forward as willing implementers of the new policy. The resulting conservatism extends beyond encouraging academics to restrict themselves to established patterns of research behavior, impinging on the ideological content of what is produced. In this Kuhnian world of 'normal science', the established paradigm remains unchallenged. As Frederic Lee (2007) has shown with reference to economics departments in the UK, requirements to succeed in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, now replaced by the

³ Defined in the UK Education Reform Act 1988, Section 202 (2) as the need for University Commissioners 'to ensure that academic staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions'.

⁴ The cases of the 'insubordinate' Professor Thomas Docherty at Warwick University, suspended for nine months for making ironic comments and projecting negative body language, Carole McCartney, reprimanded for 'political tweeting' at the University of Leeds and, most troubling of all, Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign whose job offer was rescinded for sending assertive tweets about the Gaza conflict are but the most recent cases.

Research Excellence Framework, REF) compelled departments to maximise publications in neo-classical ‘diamond list’ journals. This led to a sharp decline in recruitment of ‘heterodox’ faculty and an ideological homogenisation of approach.

There is an inescapable irony that the ideological basis of the reforms has been a commitment to privatisation of state assets and deregulation. While deregulation of the financial sector proceeded, with disastrous consequences largely unanticipated by neoclassical economists, this has been complemented by the hyper-regulation of the remaining state sector under the guise of what is now generally called ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) (Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 1990). This is a strategy for reorienting existing state institutions, which were already geared towards serving the interests of capital in a general sense, according to the imperatives of neoliberalism. In NPM the managerial mode of evaluation colonises all spheres once regarded as at least semi-detached from the sphere of business, resulting in forms and practices that are distinctly reminiscent of the command economy established by the Stalin regime. This convergence of the running of British HE in particular, resulting from neo-liberal reforms, with central features of the now defunct Soviet central planning model would cheer the most unreformed Hegelian: apparent opposites interpenetrate, but are caught midway, unable to complete a transition.

Of course one should never take ideological veneers at face value. Both the Soviet Party and the ‘neoliberal thought collective’ (Hayek’s Mont Pèlerin Society and others) developed what Philip Mirowski (2013: 68) calls a ‘double truth doctrine’ according to which there is an ‘exoteric version of its doctrine for the masses’ and ‘an esoteric doctrine for a small closed elite’, and that these are radically in contradiction with each other. Appropriately enough Mirowski calls the neoliberal version a ‘Russian doll’ (2013: 75) with multiple levels as, *inter alia*, warnings of expanding state activity conceal an advocacy of a strong state and portrayals of the market as something natural conceals a requirement for state intervention constantly to reconstruct it (2013: 69). Alexander Obolonsky similarly presents official Soviet ideology as having an ‘external layer’ that ‘preached the doctrine of equality’, and an ‘internal layer’ that ‘condoned rampant privilege, nepotism, protectionism and caste discrimination’ (cited in Ryavec, 2003: 12). In each case it is the ‘internal layer’ that embodies its ‘true’ ideology and where correspondences are to be found.

Parallels between the Soviet command economy and the managerialism of British HE has been the focus of at least two incisive studies (Amann, 2003; Radice, 2008; see also Lorentz, 2012; Radice, 2013), revealing the way in which the introduction of quasi-markets and an audit culture have replicated some

important patterns and pathologies of the Soviet model. The main factor is the control of HE institutions by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through mechanisms such as the RAE/REF, and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), along with the impending Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Targets that can be monitored through audits are imposed, while unquantifiable but crucial features like professional integrity and collegiality are undermined. As David Harvie has argued, the usurpation of the 'use-value' of research outputs by 'RAE-value' determined by 'some notion of "socially necessary" research labour time' (2000: 111) leads many people's experience of research work increasingly to be a 'chore imposed by others [...] undertaken merely to satisfy needs external to the activity itself' (2000: 114). The audit-values that increasingly determine what and how teaching should take place similarly erode the professional autonomy and intrinsic satisfaction of pedagogical work.

Thatcherism and 'New Labour'

University reform in the UK developed as part of the Thatcher government's ideologically driven attempt to cut public spending by bringing quasi-markets into the public sector and making the distinction between purchasers and providers fundamental to the functioning of state enterprises. So how did it end up establishing a system resembling the twentieth century's main attempt to repress all market forces? True enough the fact that quasi-markets replaced real markets and 'organisational proxies' replaced real customers in the new system was important (Amann, 2003: 292), for this replicated some of the reforms Soviet administrators introduced in the post-Stalin period to deal with the tendency towards stagnation that the Soviet economy experienced (Kähönen, 2014). But this does not explain why this path was taken in the first place. At a relatively early stage of the reform process, in 1988, the conservative historian Elie Kedourie suggested that 'why it should be thought right and necessary for universities to be submitted to a regime akin to that of a command economy is quite obscure' (1988: 26). Some ideologues of *laissez-faire* economics raised critical voices at the very time the new system began to form, with some even pointing out parallels with the USSR command economy. The economist Deepak Lal argued that the government effectively nationalised universities as the only way to reconcile political pressures. Chief among them were the desires: 1) to control public expenditure on HE; 2) not to alienate the middle class benefiting from subsidised HE; 3) to maintain 'parity of esteem' among academics and Vice-Chancellors; and 4) to raise the proportion of school leavers entering HE (Lal, 1989: 5-6). The initial reforms did indeed balance these pressures, but they actually inaugurated a process whereby the inequity of various institutions has become ever more apparent. Lal recommended cutting universities free of state

control, abandoning the aim of maintaining a ‘parity of esteem’, introducing market-level fees, and providing state loans and some grants for students. Successive governments have only partially implemented this agenda, and for good reasons.

The rhetorical claims of consumer choice in HE have largely been undermined by recent research. As Roger Brown in particular has shown, the comparative information universities are now compelled to provide in order to facilitate educated consumer choice between programmes is incoherent at best since programmes 1) have no comparable aims, structure, content, learning outcomes, delivery and support; 2) have no comparable assessment methods, criteria and outcomes (marks or grades); 3) have no way of ensuring assessment judgements are valid, reliable and consistent; and 4) students pursuing the programmes (and/or interested in pursuing the programmes) have no comparable starting attainments, aspirations, motivations, learning objectives, etc. (Brown, 2007; 2011a). As Brown put it in his evidence to the UK parliament:

There are simply too many variables and unknowns for meaningful comparative information of the kind found in a typical consumer market to be produced. Nor is there any evidence that students would be any more rational in using it than consumers of conventional goods or services. (Brown, 2011b)

Unsurprisingly cynicism among academic staff in UK universities about the validity of quasi-market indicators remains at a high level.⁵ For example, the National Student Survey (NSS), essentially a customer satisfaction survey that final-year undergraduates are encouraged to complete, is widely regarded as, in the words of former director of research and evaluation at the Higher Education Academy Lee Harvey (2008), ‘shallow, costly, widely manipulated and methodologically worthless’, indeed ‘laughable’.⁶

The Thatcher government may have been wedded to the rhetoric of ‘market sovereignty’, but ministers evidently had a firmer grasp of ‘really existing capitalism’ than many economists. British HE and the private sector were already entangled to a significant extent in the 1960s, as was most dramatically revealed with the publication of documents discovered during a student occupation at the

⁵ HEFCE has had to admit as much in its 2015 document ‘The metric tide’, which states: ‘There is considerable scepticism among researchers, universities, representative bodies and learned societies about the broader use of metrics in research assessment and management’. The report is online at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/metrictide/Title,104463,en.html>.

⁶ The National Union of Students’ July 2016 decision to boycott the NSS marks an important milestone in undermining its credibility. For information see <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/motion-201-the-nss-boycott-or-sabotage>.

University of Warwick in 1970 (Thompson, 2013 [1970]), but this intensified significantly with the removal of the 'buffer' between state policy and universities when the Universities Funding Council and then HEFCE replaced the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1988 and 1992 respectively (Pratt, 1997: 10).⁷ The UGC 'bridge and buffer' had served to maintain the institutions necessary to integrate 'the old aristocracy with the upper middle class of professionals needed to run a world empire', i.e. Oxbridge, and develop new ones to 'train the researchers and specialists required for a modern industrial capitalist economy, as well as the workforce of the expanding education system itself' (Callinicos, 2006: 24). Britain's imperial decline undermined this function. In the 1960s new universities more closely connected to the expansion of private capital were established to help the UK maintain its position at the heart of the international capitalist system. Institutions now lobbied for funds within UGC, Westminster and the establishment's London clubs.⁸ When capital shifted manufacturing abroad in search of cheaper and more compliant labour power, cutting back on vocational training, it was only universities that could provide the training needed to meet the anticipated demand for forms of skilled labour. The very existence of a buffer between policy and HE now became a 'fetter' on the further development of the productive forces. The intensification of competition between institutions in the UK led to a centralisation of power akin to Soviet-style 'one-man management', as representative committees through which academic members of staff influenced policy and advanced their own professional principles have been neutered. Powerful vice-chancellors, with their executive-level remuneration packages and supported by their executive boards, now drive measures to subordinate all practices to competition throughout the institutions they lead.

What many early commentators failed to understand was that neoliberalism is not an ideology of *laissez faire* but of continual state intervention to fabricate the 'subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the fiction of markets real and consequential' (Peck, 2010: 3). For all the talk about the sovereignty of markets, Thatcher's ministers aimed for the subordination of HE to the accumulation of private capital as a major policy goal. One of the key

⁷ Halsey (2012: 62-63) quotes the UGC's own retrospective description of its role: 'It relieved the government of assuming direct responsibility for the universities, and it safeguarded the universities from political interference. More positively, it was an earnest of the government's willingness to provide money for the universities "without strings", and it enabled the universities to enjoy public funds without the fear that the gift might turn out to be a Greek one [...] The Treasury was deeply committed to the "buffer" principle, and guarded most jealously the Committee's independent status'.

⁸ I am indebted to Hugo Radice, personal communication, for this point.

functions the state plays for capital is to ensure a plentiful supply of ‘free’ labour with sufficient skills. The skills needed by the service industries that were expected to replace manufacturing were difficult to anticipate in detail, and it was unclear how the grounds would be prepared without a reorientation of HE. Thatcher’s Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker undoubtedly had this in mind when he argued that ‘above all there is an urgent need, in the interests of the nation as a whole [...] for higher education to take increasing account of the economic requirements of the country’ (quoted in Lal, 1989: 8). It was the state that had to try to anticipate the types of labour power that would be required, and UK universities had nothing like the buoyant endowments that enabled private universities in the United States to take on some of this role as well as to reproduce a coherent dominant class.

The Blair-Brown Labour government that followed in May 1997 intensified and systematised the same policy, with ex-Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) ideologues playing a role in giving the policy coherence. *Marxism Today*, the journal of the Eurocommunist wing of the CPGB, was important here, promoting a left-sounding rationale for New Labour’s embrace of the neoliberal agenda (Pimlott, 2004; 2005). One former *Marxism Today* writer, Charles Leadbeater, who became one of Tony Blair’s advisors, went as far as to argue that

[u]niversities should become not just centres of teaching and research but hubs for innovation networks in local economies, helping to spin off companies for universities, for example. Universities should become the open-cast mines of the knowledge economy. (Leadbeater, 1999: 114)

Education secretary Charles Clarke correspondingly set one of his main goals in 2003 to be ‘better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation’ (Clarke, 2003: 2). It was indeed with the Blair-Brown government that the ideologies of the market and command economies found their tightest embrace. In June 2007 governmental responsibility for universities was removed from the department responsible for general education, with the formation of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (from 2009, The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). Its strategic objectives explicitly specified the pursuit of research and teaching ‘in line with employer demand’ and ‘sustaining economic competitiveness’.⁹

⁹ The National Archive:

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/tna/+http://www.dius.gov.uk/about_DIU_S/what_we_do/objectives/.

Soviet HE

As in the UK, Soviet HE expanded considerably in the post-World War 2 era to provide the educated workforce needed to drive the unprecedented economic expansion which, to a significant extent, was driven by the state spending on armaments during the Cold War. Needing to substitute imports in all areas of the economy and to maintain a military apparatus much larger than that typical of a middle-sized economy, the USSR developed a disproportionately large HE sector. The humanities did relatively well in such conditions since foreign language skills had a number of direct applications and the arts were fundamental to the cultural dimension of the struggle for hegemony.¹⁰ The autonomy of relatively inexpensive areas of research from direct bureaucratic control, i.e. academic freedom, was one aspect of this ideological struggle in the West, yielding benefits in detection of and finding administrative solutions to the most acute social problems in conditions where living standards were rising and the welfare state was relatively well funded. The more directly repressive USSR had much less scope for such activities, so researchers in the humanities were rewarded for providing 'scientific ideologies' in support of their rulers, or retreated into a formalism where they said little essential or did so in such a way that it was accessible only to the initiated.¹¹ The scholasticism of Soviet philosophy and social science became notorious by the 1960s (Blakeley, 1961), though important achievements were nevertheless forthcoming.

The much narrower space for critical research in the USSR did not simply express the authoritarian proclivities of policymakers, but the institutional dynamics that resulted from external pressure. Surrounded by hostile powers with a much greater capacity for belligerence, Stalin launched the USSR on an irreversible path towards the complete subjugation of economic development to military competition with the First Five Year Plan of 1929-32. With private enterprise already subordinated to the state as a result of revolution and civil war (what Lenin termed 'state capitalism'), the institutions of the state were now reorganised to serve the process of capital accumulation, rationalising working practices through the 'scientific organisation of labour' (NOT), and tightening up management through so-called 'institutions of agitation' (Beissinger, 1988; Zhukova, 1990). Schools that had been pioneers in the progressive teaching methods advocated by John Dewey and others underwent a dramatic 'instrumentalisation', with a return to traditional methods of instruction.¹²

¹⁰ On the importance of the cultural dimension of this struggle in the USSR in Stalin's time, see Clark (2011).

¹¹ On the principles being invoked here see Bourdieu (1975).

¹² On shifts in Soviet school policy and practice see, especially, Holmes (1991).

Universities faced existential threats during the turmoil of the 1929-32 transition, but what emerged was a 'palimpsestic' formation in which the prestigious institutions established by the bureaucracy of the Tsarist absolutist state were overlain by the requirement to be linked to raising production, which was enforced by 'one-man management' (see David-Fox, 2000). Natural science and engineering was geared towards the development of means of production and destruction (the military), the social sciences towards the most effective mobilisation of the labour power of the population, and the humanities towards techniques of persuasion and ideological consolidation at home and abroad.

The great purges of the late 1930s, which centred on repression of the Bolshevik 'old guard' and national Communists, also had serious ramifications for many intellectuals in HE institutions in the USSR. It should be noted, however, that apart from the repression of intellectuals specifically associated with the political opposition, the targets of the purges were poorly defined. Stalin's exhortations to 'purge the Party and the economic organisations of unreliable, unstable and degenerate elements' (Stalin, 1972 [1934]: 376) had more direct effects on the administration than faculty, even if it encouraged denunciations driven by localised institutional politics. Systematic repression of advocates of specific theories within academia was rare, especially in areas relatively detached from administrative practice. In the humanities, for instance, a similar number of vocal supporters of the officially-supported (between 1932 and 1950) 'Marrist' current in linguistics perished as their opponents, while even the most outspoken representatives of the defeated Russian Formalist school of literary criticism survived and continued to work, while many of the supposedly victorious Marxist critics perished.¹³ It was the humanities that generally proved the most difficult to manage by their very nature, and a certain plurality of perspectives was required to keep the system alive, but this needed constantly to be policed to prevent the emergence of coherent, oppositional currents.

After Stalin's death there was a significant loosening of restrictions within institutions as economic growth outstripped that of the West, but enduring Cold War pressures and restive satellite states in Eastern Europe imposed limits on any scope for dissent. As economic contradictions became more acute in the 1970s, Cold War pressures intensified at the end of that decade, and some dissident intellectuals chafed against the constraints of the system, repression became more visible once more. Finally the USSR was forced to yield its position in the hierarchy of states and the reform era began.

¹³ 'Marrism' pertains to linguistic ideas centred on the ideas of Nikolai Marr (see Brandist, 2015: 193-220).

The cases of a few high-profile, dissident intellectuals led to a general impression that it was formal censorship and state repression that was the fundamental method through which ideological conformity was maintained in Soviet HE. This was not the case, especially after Stalin's death in 1953. The occasional and very visible intervention by state censors only served to set markers and deal with failures in more routine forms of regulation.¹⁴ The institutional structures that channeled competition for resources, reputation and professional advancement in ways serving the imperative of capital accumulation and so the perpetuation of the power structure were generally sufficient to orient intellectual labour. An elaborate apparatus distributed resources according to such criteria as the 'linking' or 'coordination of scholarship and society' (*uviazka nauki i obshchestva*), which needed to be demonstrated in applications and justified in periodic reports to funding bodies (see, for instance, Fortescue, 1990: passim; Josephson, 1997: 277ff). Research teams and institutions competed with each other according to elaborate metrics, with information flowing upwards, from *kafedra* (department) through faculty to the education ministries and targets descending from the administration and ultimately the state by the same route. Periodic inspections enforced coherence and conformity, imposing strict limits on professional autonomy, while special funds encouraged the development of research areas held to be topical. Such mechanisms were merely the way in which the general dynamic of the command economy manifested itself in HE.

Accumulation, competition and centralisation

It is, however, the more general internal structures and practices of the Soviet command economy rather than the specific features of Soviet HE that find echoes in the new managerialism of neoliberal HE. As Hugo Radice (2008: 117) notes, an understanding of this requires that the question is placed in its 'broader social context', meaning the complex relationship between the Soviet system and 'capitalism, as both origin and adversary', and in the 'growing imbrication' of British HE 'with the private sector'. It may well be, however, that we are not dealing with mere analogy and resemblance but with a more fundamental adoption of Soviet-style practices and organisational forms by the neoliberal state.

NPM is the form in which the neoliberal reorientation of state institutions more directly to support the competitiveness of capitals within its orbit embeds the logic of competition throughout those institutions. Though having important intellectual roots in Public Choice Theory and the new Institutional Economics that developed in US business schools (Gruening, 2001; Peters, 2013), influence

¹⁴ On similar developments in Soviet mass media, see Sparks and Reading (1998).

has flowed in two directions. NPM maintains important connections with Scientific Management, the various systems of factory organisation that had developed from the system of Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylorism ‘shifted effective control from the shop floor to management’, engineering the entire work process from beginning to end (Rabinbach, 1990: 239). More specifically, it sought the most efficient method of fulfilling all tasks on the shop floor by dividing them into ‘replicable units’, while ‘linking wages to productivity through “time and motion” studies, keyed to the speed and output of the individual worker’ (Rabinbach, 1990: 239). Moving from the factory to the entire administrative process required considerable modifications to the Taylorist system, which Soviet administrators were in the forefront of institutionalising and developing in the 1920s, when industrial psychology, psychotechnics, and the training of both managers and shop-floor workers had been incorporated. As Beissinger (1988: 84) notes, ‘[i]n their scope and reach, Soviet attempts in the 1920s to infuse administration with the principles and methods of Scientific Management far surpassed any of the concurrent efforts directed by Western governments’. At the end of that decade both manager and worker resistance to rationalisation was very considerable and results of rationalisation were in many cases marginal. Stalin’s ‘great break’ of 1928-32 involved arrests of prominent specialists in the production process for sabotage and wrecking and a sharp increase use of coercion in the productive process. The result was a well-known vicious circle in which planners set challenging targets, managers hoarded supplies and capacity to be able to respond to further increased targets, workers worked slowly to be able to accelerate when faced with those targets and planners responding by increasing targets.

More sophisticated techniques saw a sharp resurgence under Khrushchev’s *perestroika*, with the introduction of notions of profit into accounting and the proliferation of market analogues. It was at this time that a number of economists, including Galbraith (1967), hypothesised the convergence of Soviet and Western economies on the basis of industrial development and the emergence of the new forms of pricing and planning in the USSR.¹⁵ The extent of any convergence was, however, severely limited because of the USSR’s capacity to obstruct the globalising trends of western capital. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Soviet system and capitalism resulted in the internalisation of the main dynamic of latter by the former, though it manifested

¹⁵ The trend was arguably begun by the Dutch economist Jan Tinbergen (1961), but became quite widespread, even finding an echo in the work of the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1964). Marcuse’s work on ‘one-dimensional’ language and thought seems rather more suited to neoliberalism than the corporate forms it was designed to analyse. See also Gouré et al. (1973).

itself in a specific way. The state bureaucracy, like the management of a large corporation, became the institutional personification of capital, accumulating for the sake of accumulation in order to withstand the pressures of competition. The fact that the form the competition took was primarily military did not alter the fundamental principle that was in operation since the proportion of the economy dedicated to military production was so much greater than in the West. The same competitive logic was passed down through the entire system in the name of 'socialist competition' (*sotsialisticheskoe sorevnevanie*), which Isaac Deutscher (1952: 387) aptly labeled 'bourgeois competition' with 'ideological embellishments'. The very logic of this struggle led to the centralisation of control, 'one-man management' that allowed often unpopular but 'necessary' policies, e.g. to raise productivity or close uncompetitive units of production, to be imposed throughout each enterprise without recourse to negotiation.

Despite their opposing starting points as far as the modality of relations between state and economy is concerned, the Stalinist and neo-liberal projects share something more fundamental: both projects aim at the complete subordination of all social institutions to the accumulation of capital. This is reflected in highly utopian political programmes based on the myth that managers could harmonise economy and society or, more accurately, engineer social institutions to serve a reified, economic idol.¹⁶ The drive to accumulate capital is, in the Soviet and Western capitalist cases, imposed by the logic of competition – in varying proportions commercial, military and geostrategic. Fundamentally, capital accumulation is in both cases secured through the exploitation of labour power. It was, moreover, this common ground that allowed the transfer from post-Stalinist modes of *de facto* collective-bureaucratic 'ownership' and control to private, openly capitalist, modes of ownership and control to take place as the Soviet Union approached disintegration, without any revolutionary transformation. Already in the early 1970s groups of neoliberal intellectuals were working in academic think-tanks in the USSR under the protection of powerful *apparatchiki* like Iurii Andropov (Flaherty, 1991: 129), but it was not until the post-Stalinist system began to collapse that they were able to exert a significant influence. *De facto* privatisation took place under Gorbachev, and *de jure* privatisation under Yeltsin, with directors of nationalised enterprises becoming directors of privatised enterprises. As Bukharin and Preobrazhensky (1969 [1919]: 163) had put it, discussing nationalisation of industry during the 1914-18 war, 'the capitalists simply transferred their possessions from one pocket to another; the possessions remained as large as ever'.

¹⁶ Common invocations of the 'health' or 'needs' of the economy in isolation from, or even in contradistinction to, how well or poorly the majority of the population actually live, are clear examples of this ideological formation.

Thus, when western neo-conservatives met with East-European advocates of ‘market socialism’ in such fora as the Centre for the Study of Economic and Social Problems (CESES) in Milan (Bockman, 2007; 2011) they shared more than a belief in neo-classical economics. ‘Market socialists’ hoped to gear the state towards maximising competition between enterprises and guarding against the emergence of monopolies. While critical of the Soviet command system, and keen for economies to be free of its military demands, they failed to understand that any state integrated into the world economy has to assist *its* capitals in competition with foreign capitals, backed by foreign states, in the last instance militarily. They took the Soviet state’s protection of enterprises against the pressures of international capital for granted. Once it had gone foreign capital, backed by their own states, overwhelmed the relatively weak enterprises of the Soviet bloc. Yet another crucial factor was in play: increased competition from rising Asian economies placed key sectors of the Western economy in a precarious position. Faced with this, US and European capitals required their states prioritise supporting their competitiveness rather than intervening to dampen business cycles and support full employment. This involved the inculcation of competitive behavior throughout the state and society in general and its presentation as natural. Crucial here was what Judith Merkle (1980: 262) calls ‘the continual exchange of organisational techniques within [...] a common industrial – not political – culture; this international system of rational-technical organisation rested the foundations laid by the old international Scientific Management movement’. As Western consultants flooded into the former Eastern Bloc to advise on ways to dismantle obstacles to international capital and to pursue privatisation, they acquired greater awareness of the practices characteristic of post-Stalinist state institutions to promote and support the competitiveness of capitals based within its jurisdiction. NPM was the synthesis.

Resistance in the Soviet workplace

Fortunately this account of shifts in governmental policy and managerial practice is only part of the story. While the Soviet economy clearly achieved impressive results (the space programme and parity of nuclear weapons with the USA by 1970 perhaps the most symbolic), the bureaucratic system had a range of pathologies and generated patterns of resistance that ultimately undermined its effectiveness.¹⁷ The Soviet workplace was not a harmonious environment. Not only were workers separated from all decision-making in workplaces, atomised

¹⁷ For an interesting account of the ways in which repressive aspects of Taylorism reached their apogee in Stalin’s Russia, while interacting with indigenous practices see Merkle (1980: 121-135).

by the widespread implementation of performance-related pay (piece-rates) and subjected to continual pressures to raise productivity, but this was justified in rhetoric that maintained the outward forms of the long-defeated revolutionary movement. The pressures of capital accumulation led to an experience of the workplace as an exploitative environment where appeals to the rhetorical shadow of residual 'socialist' forms were regarded with cynicism. Constant attempts to intensify the productivity of labour power failed in the last instance because despite their atomisation and incapacity to organise collectively for more than sporadic struggles, workers resisted intensification by asserting 'negative sanctions directly at the point of production' (Filtzer, 1996: 24). Problems that arose out of the bureaucracy's incapacity accurately to process data from millions of transactions were rendered chronic by the fact that workers experienced a profound level of alienation from the system, refused actively to participate in problem-solving, and instead took advantage of the slippages in the system to relieve pressure on themselves and their colleagues.

Attempts by senior managers to increase pressure by raising targets and tightening up the system proved ineffective because they increased alienation and encouraged the development of new tactics to absorb pressure from above. As Tony Cliff commented as early as 1955, the drive to raise the productivity of labour, to 'rationalise' and 'accentuate' exploitation, created its own impediment to raising productivity:

By the effort to convert the worker into a cog of the bureaucrat's productive machine, they kill in him what they most need, productivity and creative ability...The more skilled and integrated the working class the more will it resist alienation and exploitation, but also show contempt for its exploiters and oppressors. The workers have lost respect for the bureaucracy as technical administrators. No ruling class can continue for long to maintain itself in the face of popular contempt. (Cliff, 1970 [1955]: 309-310)

The creativity and ingenuity of millions of workers that were needed to make the system work were instead diverted into negative forms of individualised resistance that opened space for indolence and, often, drunkenness. All this is quite familiar to anyone who worked in mass production industries during times of full employment, and was certainly not unique to the Soviet case (see, for instance, Hamper, 1992). Indeed, the histories of individual corporations like Ford, General Motors or IBM exhibit fundamentally the same practices and tendency toward stagnation, including phases of dictatorial expansion, limited pluralism, stagnation and restructuring that characterised the history of the USSR from the end of the 1920s (Halbertstam, 1986; Harman, 1989; Wilhelm, 1985; Wright, 1979).

Common patterns of resistance

Soviet bureaucrats proved ever less capable of appropriating what Marx called the ‘general intellect’, that is ‘the faculty of language, the disposition to learn, memory, the capacity to abstract, and the inclinations towards self-reflexivity’ (Virno, 2007: 6).¹⁸ Indeed, these capacities were often employed to resist bureaucratic pressures and in ways detrimental to the productive process itself. Although many tactics adopted by workers were not theorised in the strict sense, they nevertheless achieved a form of articulation with the development of workplace jargon or even argot. These became a kind of shadow vocabulary to the widely derided language of Soviet managerialism, and which has found distinct echoes in the parasitic, ‘bullshit’ language of neoliberalism (Lorentz, 2012). It was quite common for petty managers to adopt the same conceptions as ways of developing a buffer between their superiors and subordinates. This led some commentators to claim an unusual level of collusion between Soviet managers and workers, but the very category of ‘manager’ is one that obscures much more than it reveals, and often deliberately so.

The proliferation of job titles bearing the word ‘manager’ and the re-description of routine administrative tasks as ‘management’ is so common in today’s universities that it often passes without comment. This attempt to present everyday work as having managerial function is reinforced by training courses that constantly propagandise the idea that there is no real division between managers and other staff within the institution. We are, it seems, ‘*all managers*’, however minimal supervisory roles may actually be, or else senior decision-makers are simply ‘*all employees*’. At the same time academics are expected to act as entrepreneurs, seeking out opportunities for funding and commercialisation. Disingenuous appeals to the image of a long-vanished collegiality, in which university staff exerted an unusual amount of control over their activities, are very much akin to the dominant Soviet ideology of the ‘comradely’ practices of the ‘socialist’ economy. In each case the structures of power over resources and people are deliberately obscured, even though they remain very real and actively experienced. There is a palpable and growing sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in universities, especially resulting from spiraling vice-chancellor remuneration, falling staff salaries and pensions, increasing workloads, and the imposition of bureaucratic imperatives that are often

¹⁸ Tony Smith (2013) provides a penetrating critique of Paolo Virno and Carlo Vercellone’s development of Marx’s theory of capital into an analysis of post-fordism, noting that ‘*any and all variants of capital rest on a “depository of cognitive competences that cannot be objectified”, that is, on the general intellect with “operational materiality” insofar as it “organizes the production process and the ‘life-world”*’ (ibid.: 248).

antithetical to professional values. This proletarianisation has encouraged cynicism towards self-interested invocations of ‘collegiality’, and hostility among most staff towards the university management and government agencies. This is reflected in the transformation of the Association of University Teachers, an organisation that was caught midway between viewing itself as a trade union and professional association, into the University and College Union, unambiguously a trade union, which incorporates both Further and Higher Education staff.

While the union makes a real difference to everyday practices within institutions, recent campaigns over pay and pensions (deferred pay) have been miserable failures, to a considerable extent due to very poor national leadership, but also because the union has faced tightening legal constraints on its ability to take collective action that is effective. Action short of a strike, in the form of an assessment boycott, may now attract the complete withdrawal of salary, while strike action needs to be protracted in order to put any significant pressure on employers. Currently unable to challenge and overcome these limitations, the organisation has entered a period of retrenchment and the defense of past gains through attrition. Employee discontent and resentment, along with cynicism towards managerial metrics and imperatives are never far beneath the surface, but confidence to take collective action is low. The constraints on Soviet workers were considerably more severe than in the UK, but discontent nevertheless found expression through forms of informal resistance ranging from negative varieties of individual resistance (absences, unproductive working, sabotage) to forms of collusion, conspiracy and reciprocal support among those who fundamentally shared a position of alienation from the control of resources. Some of these forms are remarkably familiar to those operating in HE today.

In his 2003 article, Amann provocatively outlined parallels between the way in which practices then developing in British HE resembled those of Soviet administrators and workers alike, who ‘became masters of prioritisation and learned to absorb huge amounts of administrative pressure’, developing ‘essential survival skills’ that rendered the bureaucratic direction of the command economy ineffective (2003: 471). In the last decade collegiality has even further given way to instrumental behaviour, and alienation from the demands of ‘corporate identity’ has become ubiquitous. Senior managers strive to create an image of central omnipotence, intervening to ensure the fulfillment of targets (*podmena*) (Fortescue, 1983: 179), issuing internal communications that all is well with the institution (*vran’e*), while issuing guidelines and ‘key performance indicators’ to motivate staff (*melochnaia opeika*, micromanagement). Members of staff respond by ingratiating themselves with their superiors (*blat’*), and cover for each other in order to defend themselves from scrutiny (*krugovaia porukha*, *esprit*

de corps).¹⁹ Individual staff evaluations, reports to funding bodies, departmental or team reports are routinely padded with superfluous detail to illustrate objectives have been ‘met’ and plans have been ‘fulfilled’ (*pripiska*), dazzling the reader with superficial show (*pokazukha*) in order to distract attention from failures (*ochkovtiratel’stvo*, literally eye-wiping, perhaps best rendered as eyewash, camouflage). Seeking to defend their own patch (*mestnichestvo*, *vedomstvennost’*), petty managers collude with other staff, tactically shifting between shows of deference, bluff and deception (*bumazhnoe tvorchestvo*, literally ‘paper creation’), though they may, instead, choose to pass on the pressures from above and bully their subordinates. Senior managers respond by issuing polemics against tendencies that cannot successfully be coerced and issue more targets and pressures that perpetuate the cycle.²⁰ The whole process begins to resemble what Antonio Gramsci (1971: 149) was to call ‘a game of blind man’s buff’, by which oppositional tendencies that cannot be coerced joust with agents of a ruling apparatus that cannot be overcome.

It would be tempting to designate these behavior patterns as ‘spontaneous’, though as Gramsci argued, ‘pure spontaneity’ is a myth. These practices are learned and passed on, so ‘spontaneity’ can at most signify that ‘the [perhaps rudimentary] elements of “conscious leadership” cannot be checked, have left no conscious document’ (Gramsci, 1971: 196). Moreover, in the USSR at least, they achieved a degree of self-reflexiveness, which then became embedded in popular culture through urban folklore (anecdotes and the like) and satire. The level of conceptualisation, and the extent to which it spread, suggests these forms of struggle developed beyond what Gramsci termed an ‘immanent’ or ‘spontaneous grammar’ to acquire a ‘normative’ status, a grammatical conformity ‘made up of reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching [...] and in mimicry and teasing’ (Gramsci, 1985: 180).²¹ The repressive conditions of Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes made it very difficult to develop this ‘normative grammar’ into a systematic account of one’s place within the institutional structure and within

¹⁹ On the history of the term *krugovaia porukha*, see Rowney (2009: 32).

²⁰ Other pathologies of bureaucracy identified by Russian analysts include formalistic answers (*otpiski*), the turning of norms and rules into goals in themselves (*samotsel*), pedantic execution of directives, humoring superiors, localism, departmentalism, ‘over-insuring’, passing the buck (Ryavec, 1996: 73-4; 2003: 97).

²¹ One cartoon by Mikhail Cheremnykh in the popular Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil* from 1953 shows the vocabulary of the game of ‘blind man’s buff’ was well established by the time of Stalin’s death. It shows a group of four petty managers drawing up a report and one asking: ‘Wouldn’t it be too little if we write in [*pripisat*] the report that we have only fulfilled the plan by 20%?’ To which another answers ‘It’s sufficient, but they’ll think it is a clear case of eyewash [*ochkovtiratel’stvo*]’. Online at <http://second-person.livejournal.com/13656.html>.

society as a whole. 'Organic intellectuals' remained atomised and the formation of independent organisation occasional and sporadic at best.

Here we can begin to see some of the practical implications of our study. The emergence of forms of struggle akin to those of Soviet workers and petty managers among UK university staff, and other areas of the public sector dominated by NPM, signifies the emergence of an incipient class-consciousness arising directly from the ongoing process of proletarianisation. While organising academics may still resemble herding cats, a greater consistency of orientation now emerges among the growing ranks of staff whose professional autonomy and access to resources is very narrow indeed. Significant obstacles to effective organisation and collective action remain, but they are on a scale nowhere near those that faced Soviet workers. In such circumstances it may well prove fruitful to supplement traditional forms of trades union organisation with attempts to structure and systematise the patterns of resistance emerging within institutions that imply a critique of neoliberal imperatives in HE. Their pursuit obstructs NPM while opening a space not simply for indolence but for the very autonomous professional activities NPM squeezes out. This may highlight and take advantage of the 'palimpsestic' nature of HE today, reconnecting with the sense of vocation many who work in HE retain despite the commodification of teaching and research. In order to make the connection most effective means simultaneously to pursue a relentless ideology-critique of NPM while articulating an alternative vision of HE based on those aspects of the university 'palimpsest' that are irreducible to corporate imperatives, while spurning all elitism. In short it means to provide intellectual leadership as well as to pursue bread-and-butter issues, indeed to bind them together, just as neoliberalism and NPM are bound together.

Conclusion

One reason the parallels between the (post-)Stalinist and neoliberal projects become particularly clear in the case of the latter's *perestroika* of HE is that both projects had important educational dimensions. In each case *homo politicus* is to be reduced to the ultimately manipulable *homo economicus* who accepts their ignorance and defers to the central bureaucratic apparatus or the market as supreme 'information processor' (Mirowski, 2013: 54-55). Those who sell their labour power must be taught to understand that the question of power (*vopros o vlasti*) is settled, the 'end of history' has arrived. For most, at least, education should now yield to the creation of subjectivities who constantly yield to the imperatives of capital, they must seek training to serve the indefinite expansion of value, and they must pay for the privilege. In reality, though, these are severely

malfunctioning systems that are redolent with contradictions and pathologies. Analysis and critique of these problems, as well as engagement in the ideological struggles over the future of HE and its place in society more generally are indispensable. They are only part of a larger process, however. Successful resistance requires an understanding of the forms of oppositional activity generated by the system itself and their coordination into a unified strategy with agreed aims and objectives. In other words, it requires a democratic, oppositional educational programme that makes explicit and structures the incipient and sporadic conception of the world that is embedded in the very process of resisting the rule of capital. This means to struggle for leadership at the micro and macro levels simultaneously, to articulate a vision that is consistent from the small, everyday acts of solidarity up to an alternative principle of social organisation.

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