Working in the present

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A colleague, on recently departing academia for a senior post in the public service, placed the books and journals he thought it unlikely he would need in his new position in a pile outside his office. As the pile grew, however, it became clear that more was involved in this process than at first met the eye. For it was evident that a reasonably comprehensive social science library, patiently accumulated over two to three decades, was being subjected to an ideological culling of no mean proportions.

Browsing through the abandoned volumes on the off-chance of adding a choice item or two to our own collections proved, for those of us left behind, something of an exercise in nostalgia. Early issues of the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*; the complete set of *Theoretical Practice*; the Penguin translation of Marx's *Grundrisse*; the writings of Rosa Luxemburg; Deutscher's study of Trotsky - an unexpected re-acquaintance with titles which, twenty or even ten years ago, would have occupied a well-thumbed position at the front of most of our shelves but which, subsequently, had been nudged to the back and sometimes out of sight, no longer in regular use.

While this made for slim bibliographic pickings, it did provide food for thought in publicly dramatising an intellectual odyssey which, over the past decade or so, has been a fairly common one for academics working in the social sciences and humanities. Viewed exclusively in the light of the short term exigencies of the Dawkins reforms, this odyssey might appear to be simply one of a crouching submission to the demands of a new pragmatism: the sacrifice of revolutionary principles for a mess of research grants, consultancies or government appointments.

There is, of course, no shortage of accounts cast in this vein. Their error, it seems to me, is that, in attributing too much to the effects of the Dawkins initiatives, they fail to appreciate the respects in which such governmental interventions into the agendas of higher education have tended to reinforce, and to focus more sharply, intellectual tendencies that were already clearly discernible pre-Dawkins and which have a much broader provenance.

If these tendencies have a common direction, it is in their impetus toward working in the present; that is, toward forms of intellectual work that are capable of making calculable and appreciable contributions to presently existing institutions, programmes and endeavours. As such they also have a common aversion: to intellectual work which, in the name of an overriding commitment to large-scale social change at some future point in time, necessarily castigates work which concerns itself with the mundanities of the here and now as compromised and compromising.

This shift of emphasis and orientation has been easier to effect in some fields of inquiry than others. In my own - the field of cultural studies - it has proved more difficult than in most. For cultural studies - at least in many of its versions -imagines that it can dispense with presently available forms of intellectual and political calculation in view of what it projects as an impending communion with forces or principles of a higher order: reason, universal history, community, or culture itself. Given this political orientation, much of the work that has been associated with this field has been almost constitutively inclined to overlook presently available practical and political agendas to which intellectual work might usefully be connected in favour of some ideal future set of relations when knowledge - uncontaminated by any interim traffic with the presently existing - will somehow magically become practical once again.

Terry Eagleton's recent appreciation of Raymond Williams - one of the more influential founding figures of cultural studies - helps underline the point I am after here. Remarking, apropos Williams's Welsh background, that he 'had known what community could be, and would not rest until it was recreated on an international scale,' Eagleton goes on to observe that it was precisely the depth of Williams's experience of community and its prefigurative potential that explained 'why it would not have been possible for him to do what so many have now done, scale down his hopes and trim his political sails, face reality'. This ability to always take the long perspective, Eagleton concludes, allowed Williams 'to avoid, as he once dryly commented, "making long-term adjustments to short-term problems"'. [1]

That's well put and certainly worth more than a snappy Keynesian riposte about the relationship between the long-term and mortality. What it tends to repress, however, is whether there might not be a need to adjust what the long-term issues are thought to be so as to ground future horizons more circumspectly and provisionally in the unpredictable outcomes of present political relations and negotiations. Where long-term horizons are not thus practically grounded in the present, the political sentiments and ambitions that are invested in such 'world-historical' projects (the restitution of community at an international level, for example) too often prove immune to any moderation in the light of the recalcitrance and intransitivity of our immediate historical environment. The result is then a hiatus between the short and the long terms which no amount of dialectics can overcome.

The difficulties this can occasion were compellingly illustrated in the programme for intellectual work which Stuart Hall proposed in addressing a conference, held at the University of Illinois in April 1990, convened to debate the directions that future work in cultural studies should take. Hall's point of departure was to insist on the need to take stock of the intellectual and political impact of postmodernism, particularly its role in calling into question the modernist belief in long, continuous historical processes destined to produce, as their outcomes, subjects of particular kinds - a class conscious proletariat, for example. While accepting these postmodernist perspectives, however, Hall argued that cultural studies should still think of its primary task as being that of producing organic intellectuals who would conduct themselves as if history displayed such a logic and as if their role were that of bringing its tendencies to fruition. In sum, the political and intellectual programme Hall mapped out for cultural studies was one committed to the production of organic intellectuals as if the historical mechanisms which could give such intellectuals a function were still in place - while, at the same time, accepting that this was not so.

This deeply contradictory formulation is telling evidence of the price that can be paid if particular investments in precisely what is at stake in the long-term are not reviewed. To summon intellectuals to take part in a historical project whose founding premises are acknowledged to be counter-factual is to pretend that we can hoodwink ourselves into believing and acting as if nothing has changed regarding the horizons within which the outcomes of intellectual work must be calculated. In such a conception, the perspective of the long-term supports the prospect of working effectively in the present much like the noose supports a hanged man. In too clearly belying a wistfulness for the political logic of old times it inhibits an effective adjustment to the changing conditions of intellectual work and the requirements to which it must be subject.

It can now, for example, count as little more than quaint to suggest to a gathering of university pedagogues, most of them in government employment, that they should think of themselves as organic intellectuals whose function derives from their attachments to autochthonous social movements. However much this might appeal to our political imaginations, it can only serve to cloud our understanding of the conditions - both enabling and constraining - to which intellectual work in the academy is subject.

This is particularly so in view of the degree to which such conceptions of the relations between the long and the short terms are able constantly to defer - and thus to fudge - the issue of accountability in intellectual work. The debates which the introduction of more centralised mechanisms of research funding have prompted within the humanities sectors of the academy provide a telling illustration. Yet to speak of 'debates' here is misleading. For, apart from a few dissenting voices, most spokespersons for the humanities have agreed in deploring the new arrangements precisely because - at least potentially - they render humanities research (and thus humanities researchers) more accountable to their governmental paymasters. The grounds on which they have done so, moreover, have been substantially identical no matter what their political persuasions. Governmental accountability has been resisted by appealing to some higher and purer form of accountability - frequently one whose moment of reckoning is safely situated in the future.

In opposing the present requirement that research monies be disbursed in accordance with governmentally determined priorities and criteria of relevance, conservatively inclined scholars have thus appealed to traditional conceptions of the intellectual - that figure whose responsibility it is to ensure that the higher values of culture and civilisation are not sacrificed to short-term political exigencies. In this view, the need for public forms of accountability is discounted via an appeal to a 'higher' form of accountability (to 'art', or 'culture') whose requirements, of course, are best left to be intuited by the scholarly community itself.

While the Romantic genealogy of the argument is clear, the terms in which this has been drawn on in recent public defences of the humanities have often been transparently self-serving. This is especially so of what remains one of the most influential and succinct formulations of the position: Ian Donaldson's address on the future of the humanities given at the 1988 conference of the Australian Universities Languages and Literature Association. How did Donaldson and his largely approving audience perceive what was at issue in the question of public accountability? Well, largely in terms of the threat it posed to the capacity of an intellectual caste to regulate its research activities in ways calculated to serve its own interests and purposes or those of a narrowly conceived circle of cultural clients.

Donaldson's ire was thus particularly stirred by the fact that the new ARC guidelines seemed to take little account of the need of Australian Renaissance specialists to have their own archive of original manuscripts and other primary documents on which to base their research rather than being dependent on overseas trips for such purposes. Contrariwise, he was able to cite a proposal for building a replica of the Globe Theatre on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin - a project allegedly on the brink of fruition as a result of the exertions of a colleague in ANU's Department of English - as a sign that all was not lost to the new philistines. Readers will draw their own conclusions. For my part, however, the mere voicing of such cultic concerns serves only to confirm the conviction that educational and cultural policies which take their bearings from the whims of culture's advocates are likely to prove capriciously irrelevant to the formation of a policy calculus which rests on a broad conception of the public interest.

On the face of it, the radical case against making humanities research more dependent on, and accountable to, centralised allocative mechanisms has little in common with this kind of special pleading. For it has most typically rested on an appeal to the critical function of intellectual work. Yet, in this case too, presently existing forms of accountability and the relations of knowledge production they imply are declined in the name of a higher form of accountability - to the critical spirit. Since, however, this spirit lacks any publicly scrutable mechanisms for making its edicts known, the scholarly community is once again obligingly cast in the role of oracle - although this time for the spirit of critique rather than for the standards of culture.

Stephen Knight's essay 'Searching for Research or The Selling of the Australian Mind' offers a good example of this oracular logic. Arguing that the new mechanisms for funding university research involve increasingly centralised forms of control over, and scrutiny of, Australian intellectual life, Knight contends that these mechanisms are inherently biased against socially critical forms of research. This is chiefly because centralised forms of assessment require that projects be adequately described, well planned and carefully budgeted in a manner which Knight views as being intrinsically at odds with 'incisive, socially critical work'. For this, it seems, is too ruminative an enterprise to be actually planned for. As Knight puts it:

> You can't assess something unless it is worked out far ahead and carefully detailed. So there is no high assessment for someone who says: "I just want to think about such and such a topic and then write a book on it." This is a pity, because that is how most of the best books start. [2]

These perspectives lead Knight to project two options for Humanities researchers: to remain faithful to 'the honoured tradition of socially critical interpretation' and, presumably, fail to obtain any research funds, or to 'go for it bald-headed, accept the apparent reification of work and planning and also accept the glittering tools: word-processors cleverer than ever, printers wonderfully quiet, air fares in abundance, bundles of faxes', but at the price of an increasingly mechanical approach to research that will ill serve any socially critical purpose. [3]

The motivation for this argument is, of course, different from that which informs traditional defences of the humanities. Yet it is disturbingly familiar in at least two respects. First, it treats the unplannable book, effortlessly conceived by a genially detached individual author ('I just want to think...'), as the ideal-type of intellectual work in the humanities. Second, it is, and in spite of its best intentions, profoundly withdrawn from present forms of civic and political life. For it simply fails to consider that, in academia as in any other sphere of publicly supported activity, democratic forms of public accountability and control require

the clear and open elaboration of the criteria and conditions that must be met if particular activities are to be publicly funded.

Knight wants funding to go to the philosopher who just wants to 'sit and think long and hard about something, then write up the results of this critical thinking'[4] but who can't, it seems, think hard and long enough to knock up a decent research proposal. However, such charismatic selection can only be secured if funds are allocated within and by the academy in accordance with arbitrary and/or preferential criteria: so much for every member of faculty as a more or less automatic perk, allocation on the principle of status, giving money to the 'best minds' rather than to the proposers of the best research plans, etc.

In this sense, both the traditional and the radical humanities' responses to the new mechanisms of research funding - and to the increased emphasis on social and community relevance that is associated with them - have been, in my view, ethically and politically questionable. For both discount arguments that research activities should be rendered more publicly accountable via a set of administered and scrutable procedures in favour of the academy's caste-like regulation of its own practices. They are both thereby ultimately committed to the defence of the academy's right to exist as a privileged zone at least one step removed - so far as its research activities are concerned - from the normal principles of accountability governing the allocation of public money.

A perhaps more important consideration, however, is that neither position allows for the development of particularly effective strategies vis-a-vis the new research funding environment. Indeed, it is difficult to see how they might give rise to anything other than an endless rhetorical denunciation of the situation they deplore. For precisely to the degree that these positions rest on an appeal to some ideal cultural or political community to whom, in the best of all possible worlds, researchers should be accountable, then so they are unable to envisage any means - short of labelling them a 'sell-out' - through which the new arrangements for research funding might be productively engaged with.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that we should be starry-eyed about the operating procedures of the Australian Research Council, its criteria for the determination of research priorities, or the way it interprets those criteria.[5] Nor is it to suggest that the increasing pressure to seek funding outside the ARC system - from the private sector or from other branches of government - is without its problems. Rather, it is merely to argue that neither set of problems can be effectively engaged with if one starts from a position which, in the name of some higher calling, denies the legitimacy of the new forms of public accountability - to, in, and for the present - which these new arrangements and pressures embody.

Yet it is also to suggest that, if the rules of the game for

humanities research have changed, this is prospectively for the better. Only misplaced forms of political sentimentality should incline us to regret measures which undermine and lead beyond the model of the charismatic solo researcher responsible to none but his or her intra-muros academic peers. If ARC funding is more likely to go to individuals and teams of researchers who plan their activities systematically and in detail, it is difficult to see why there should be any cause for regret in this. Indeed, it may promote a more equitable and rational disbursement of the means of intellectual work and life.

If, moreover, humanities researchers are required to develop collaborative relations with agencies outside the academy in developing their research agendas, this can do no harm. To the contrary, the need to take into account the interests and concerns of specific policy bureaucracies can assist considerably in introducing a precision and rigour into the formulation of research objectives of a kind that is too often lacking when such objectives are governed entirely by the self-set agendas of particular scholarly, political or cultural communities.

Of course, not all research needs to be or can be of this type. Nor, it is now clear, is there any requirement that it should be: the new funding arrangements allow universities a fair degree of leeway with regard to how they allocate small grants; and since, in the humanities at least, most 'curiosity research' involves mainly, as Knight puts it, sitting and thinking (and may be a bit of reading, too!), it can get by on relatively small amounts of money. For the rest, however, we should not automatically relate to the 'new times' as 'bad times'; to the contrary, for those who live in the present and want to work in it, they are full of new possibilities. Still, I'm holding on to my library; the end of history isn't with us yet, and times might change again.

Notes and references

1. Terry Eagleton (ed) Raymond *Williams: Critical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, p. 7.

2. Stephen Knight 'Searching for Research or The Selling of the Australian Mind' ,Meanjin, vol. 48, no. 3, 1989, p. 460. (My apologies to Stephen Knight for selecting this article as the vehicle for my arguments, as I admire most of what he writes, says and does. His interventions on this topic, however, have been particularly influential and most clearly enunciate the position that I wish to take issue with).

3. *Ibid., p.* 461.

4. *Ibid., p.* 459.

5. To the contrary: the introduction of the ARC category of Special Investigator has clearly introduced a charismatic principle of selection into the ARC's own procedures. For Special Investigators are those whose pre-eminence is such that they are to be allocated significant research funds without applying for them. This retrograde step - retrograde since it allows for research funds to be allocated without a publicly scrutable procedure resting on stated criteria of merit or relevance - is greatly to be regretted.

Two kinds of accountability

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Perhaps the most striking feature of the academic response to the Green and White Papers on Higher Education was the reassertion of what might seem to be traditional views of academic autonomy and of the broader social purposes served by higher education. Some insisted on the importance of pure research and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge while others stressed the cultural development of the individual or of the nation. It was also suggested that a system of higher education and research oriented to short term instrumental objectives may not have the flexibility to respond to as yet unknown future demands. These points were often taken to suggest that government should continue to provide adequate funding and leave the academic and research communities to get on with the job as they saw it. The implication was that the various social purposes of higher education and research would best be served by leaving decisions in the hands of the academic community itself.

In fact, the idea of autonomy and the various social goals invoked in its defense are somewhat amorphous. In the absence of careful specification they are hardly conducive to clear argumentation - as many contributions to the debate on higher education demonstrated all too clearly. Furthermore, the implied claim that the purposes of higher education would best be served by the autonomy of academic institutions as they presently stand took little account either of the dangers of institutional conservatism or of the existence of considerable dissatisfaction with the conduct of academic affairs within sections of the academic community itself.

If it is claimed that universities perform important social functions then it is difficult to argue that they should not be held responsible for their performance of those functions. While it is possible to argue that academic work should be autonomous in certain respects the demand for autonomy tout courte is indefensible. Far from rejecting the idea of accountability, I suggest that a more productive approach would be to take seriously the various respects in which the academic community and those within it might held to be responsible, and therefore accountable, for their activities. The first part of this paper examines the idea of accountability and of the scrutiny of institutions in terms of their performance while the second comments on some of the more widely canvassed of the broader social purposes of higher education and research.

Accountability

Discussion of what should happen in higher education and research now takes place in the context of a perceived shortage of public funds, which is usually taken to imply that there is a need to establish priorities for public spending. It is also widely agreed that recipients of public funds should be accountable for their uses of those funds. This is now understood by government and other funding agencies as requiring a focus on outcomes and on the use of routinised and clearly specified measures of performance as a means of evaluating achievements in terms of desired results. These assumptions are in no way peculiar to Australia or to discussion of higher education. They can be found throughout the OECD societies and they are applied quite generally to public spending programs.

The assumption that research and higher education should be accountable leaves room for discussion of the range of objectives in terms of which they might be assessed and the techniques and measures that might be appropriate. This paper concentrates on the distinct but related issue of 'accountability to ....', that is, on questions relating to the constituencies to which account should be given. It suggests that the problem with the White Paper is not that it proposed to make universities accountable but rather that it took too a restricted view of the relevant constituencies and that its specific proposals focused on too narrow a range of objectives and procedures.

Two kinds of accountability

Two broad senses of 'accountability to ...' are particularly relevant to the discussion of public spending programs: one involves formally constituted relations between superior and subordinate and the other involves some more general sense of responsibility to a constituency or public.

1 Accountability to a superior

Perhaps the most clearly understood sense of 'accountability to ...' appears in the context of formally constituted hierarchical relations of authority. These relations commonly identify one party as superior and the other as subordinate. The superior in question may be an employer, Minister, government department or educational institution, or an agent of any of these. The subordinate may be any person, organization or unit required to account to such a superior. Superiority here is not a matter of the personal qualities of the individuals concerned but rather of their occupation of the appropriate position in an hierarchical and formally constituted relationship. It means that one party may be called to account by the other. Accountability might be oriented either towards behaviour, a matter of appropriate conduct in the performance of one's duties and the proper stewardship of resources or towards results - or towards some combination of the two.

In August 1988 a joint working party of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and the Australian Committee of Directors and Principals (AVCC/ACDP) issued a Preliminary Report on Performance Indicators. The Working Party clearly regarded the notion of proper stewardship as the sense of accountability most appropriate to academic institutions. While the Introduction to the Report pays lip-service to the view that higher education should be accountable and more transparent to public scrutiny, the body of the Report is organized around the following assumption:

In making an evaluation of the state of an academic activity, whether on a national or a local scale, the question is simply "Is the institution/ faculty/department in a healthy condition?" .... The process of judging whether an institution or an academic unit is healthy or not, is rather analagous to that by which a medical judgement is arrived at concerning the health of an individual: a person is pronounced healthy if various measures of important bodily functions are within normal limits. It follows therefore that within the development of the process of regular evaluation, an important aspect is the determination of the