Finding the fault line of accountability: higher education, bureaucracy and academic identity

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Introduction

A number of interconnected debates currently hover over the field of higher education governance. Some of the more significant ones relate to notions of managerialism, definitions of quality, conflicts over ‘professional identity’ and the ‘audit culture’. These pockets of conflict reflect a broader discussion over the relationship between the state and higher education. More specifically, they represent the difficulties involved in attempting to identify an appropriate and mutually beneficial alignment between the imperatives of politics and the university.

These debates are not new. The level of intensity attached to them, however, arguably is. This intensification has resulted in a polarised debate - it appears that, within theoretical considerations at least, an impasse has been reached. On the one hand, there are strong calls for more accountability to the public purse – a desire to witness more productive returns and efficiency on investment in higher education. In this case, the university is placed squarely within a public sector reform agenda, one which is geared towards maximising public benefit. On the other, there are academics who rail against the oppressive, panoptican-like nature of the audit culture, emphasising the debilitating effects of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms on academic life.

If one does accept, however, that for a publicly-funded sector a degree of accountability is inevitable, even desirable, the polarisation of the debate in this manner becomes unhelpful. It effectively precludes any further exploration of how the imperatives of the state and the academy can realign themselves to mutually beneficial effect. In an attempt to circumvent this impasse, the current paper shifts the debate away from postmodern accounts and places the current debacle over accountability alongside an older and sometimes forgotten debate on the nature of bureaucracy. In particular, the paper explores the Weberian strand of organisation theory, examining the manner in which Weber’s ‘iron cage’ thesis inspired the ‘totally administered world of first generation critical theory, before more recently providing a basis for Jürgen Habermas’ theory of Communicative Action.

Of special interest here is Habermas’ distinction between functional and dysfunctional bureaucracy, a distinction that the paper argues can be transferred to current understandings of accountability. The paper uses this distinction to offer a more subtle analysis of accountability, one which allows some space for the development of dialogue over the changing function of the university in modern democracies.
The Context of Accountability: Public Policy and Higher Education

Any discussion of increasing accountability in higher education should be placed in the context of a broader momentum in the arena of public policy. Other related fields of practice, including health and social work, have all borne the brunt of calls for particular kinds of public sector reform (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Exworthy & Halford, 1999; Scrambler & Britten, 2001; Stecher & Kirby, 2004). Other education sectors have also been greatly affected. In the context of increasing marketisation of schooling in the UK, Hoyle and Wallace (2005: 100) argue that the autonomy of professionals has been increasingly replaced by accountability as the core principle of school management. This is a familiar argument in the context of compulsory education, an argument that has gained some ground in the context of the National Curriculum, marketisation, parental choice and the rise of performance mechanisms and other audit measures.

The HE sector has increasingly become less immune to what Travers (2007) calls the ‘new bureaucracy’, the development of which has resulted in a strong backlash from some quarters. In particular, the reaction to the notion of student as customer illustrates the depth of antagonism directed at the moving target of marketisation as applied to HE (Baldwin and James, 2000; Carlson and Fleicher, 2002; Sharrock, 2000). There are also numerous other examples in the literature detailing the perceived corrosion of traditional academic values and work practices brought about by a heightened focus on accountability and quality assurance mechanisms (Milliken and Colohan, 2004; Salter and Tapper, 2000). More significantly, there is a strong belief that fundamental aspects of the academic profession - whether they be values, work practices, identities, forms of relation - are in danger of being lost, smothered under the weight of audit-inspired data.

As is the case with so many buzzwords, however, no one definition of accountability exists, a concept that, according to Halstead (1994: 146) is one of ‘considerable complexity’. He goes on to say that much of the confusion in debates over accountability are due to the fact that people “often mean different things by the term and therefore often talk at cross purposes” (1994: 146). This confusion is reflected in the context of higher education, with Burke (2005: 1) stating that accountability (at least in the US context) is the “most advocated and least analysed word in HE – everyone uses the term but usually with multiple meanings”.

Such a lack of clarity has not prevented sides being taken over the function and outcomes of accountability. On one side, there are a number of vocal supporters of the new accountability in HE. These include Evans (1999), who wishes to call “academia to account”. Moore (2006:19), in the context of US higher education, argues that a call for increased accountability “reinforces the view that we are providers of a public good, and our work is a means to an end, not an end in itself”. According to Wellman (2006: 116), the US public is “seriously questioning higher education in terms of quality, value for money spent and institutional values.”

Admittedly, the number of supporters of the accountability agenda in HE is small, at least in published form, and there are many more who criticise what they consider to be the overbearing demands of a controlling state apparatus (Newby, 2003; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Milliken and Colohan, 2004; Shore and Wright, 2000). Key to the
current disenchantment with the priorities of HE, is the role of performance indicators in teaching and research, indicators that are viewed as reflecting a managerialist and market-driven approach to the governing of HE. This approach is believed by many to have a debilitating impact on the culture and values of institutions, exemplified by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the case of research, which according to Wilmott (2003: 132), has ‘further eroded’ the fragile ethos of collegiality, ‘deepening divisions between individual staff, departments and institutions’. The combined effects of the ‘capitalisation’ of HE culture (Gibbs, 2001: 93), including impacts on the staff-student relationship, are such that Gibbs (2001: 93) believes institutions have a “moral responsibility to resist”.

In this regard, academics have looked to the work of Michel Foucault to offer up some theoretical resistance to the demands currently placed on the university. Performativity, regimes of power, self-management, subservient audit cultures – these Foucault-inspired concepts have at various times been used in an attempt to capture the seemingly oppressive nature of modern public sector governance, with, for example, Morley characterising the quality assurance culture in HE as a ‘regime of power’ (Morley, 2002: 127).²

While the development of such antagonism is to some extent understandable, the resulting polarisation of the debate has done little to foster viable solutions to the stalemate. Such solutions are required now more than ever, as the current era “presents academe with some new, irresistible, and, in an important democratic sense, politically legitimate demands for accountability” (Zumeta, 2001: 157). The legitimacy of claims to accountability are at least tacitly acknowledged by some academics, and Morley arguably echoes the sentiments of many educators, when she states that “I am not opposed to accountability nor do I embrace romantic notions of a golden age of autonomy and collegiality in Academia” (Morley, 2002: 126).

It is essential, then, that some form of workable balance is fostered between the different sets of competing imperatives, and Halstead was foresighted enough in 1994 to argue that any ‘adequate account of educational accountability must … steer a middle ground between control and autonomy (1994:174)’. This is reflected strongly in some more recent accounts of the coming storm of American accountability in higher education, with Burke (2005: 5) arguing that the ‘dual role’ of universities “demand both autonomy and accountability,” the dual role being to “simultaneously serve and scrutinize the society that supports them.” Such tension, according to Nettles and Cole (2001: 216), is “healthy and desirable”:

In moderation, it can serve as a creative force for improvement and innovation. … Tension can quickly become unhealthy and disruptive when the elements are out of balance and one exerts a greater force on the other (Nettles and Cole, 2001: 216).

In the current context, Burke (2005: 24) arguably hits the proverbial nail on the head, when he states that the key is to clarify the “reaches and limits of accountability and to develop effective and integrated systems of accountability”. However, clarifying the reaches and limits of accountability is a complex and challenging task – any such endeavour must at some stage grapple with the larger question concerning the reaches and limits of both the state and higher education. A discussion of these parameters
finds a close and interesting parallel with another debate, on bureaucratisation, specifically that between Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas.

**Weber on Bureaucratisation**

According to Samier (2002: 29), the current perceived “corporatisation and commercialisation” of HE, parallels the rationalisation process that Weber recognised in turn of the 19th Century Germany. Weber’s attacks on the German academic profession were well publicised at the time, and he decried their passive and subservient approach to the state. However, while clearly unhappy with such a state of affairs, Weber acknowledged that the university, while relatively traditional and charismatic in character, was swayed by the broader context of societal rationalisation, contributing to a “change in the mentality of the professoriate making it more amenable to conspiring in its own transformation into an instrument of political and economic interests” (Samier, 2002: 33).

As such then, the university in Weberian terms could not escape the fate of the *Iron Cage*, a fairly bleak and pessimistic picture of the capacity of institutions such as universities to maintain their unique value orientation in the face of increasing rationalisation. As Weber put it (2004: 30),

> [t]he fate of our age, with its characteristic rationalisation and intellectualisation and above the disenchantment of the world, is that the ultimate, most sublime values have withdrawn from public life, either into the transcendental realm of mystical life or into the brotherhood of immediate personal relationships between individuals.

This analysis of the fate of the university, was developed in the context of what could be termed Weber’s diagnosis of the times, the two key components of which are the thesis of the *loss of meaning* and the thesis of the *loss of freedom*, the latter of which Weber attributes to the former (Horowitz, 1994: 200). According to Weber, the roots of the loss of meaning lay in disenchantment with religious explanations of the world. Famously, Weber argued that the protestant work ethic, distilled in the Calvinist doctrine of a calling, providing a platform upon which capitalism could flourish in the West. Paradoxically, this very success ushered in a disenchantment, allowing the flourishing of autonomous cultural spheres of value. This transformation provided the necessary condition for the institutionalisation of differentiated systems of knowledge, via the establishment of the scientific enterprise, the institutionalisation of law and the institutionalisation of an artistic enterprise.

It is the double-edged nature of this rationalisation process, however, that Weber focused on in his thesis of the loss of meaning. The disenchantment with religious worldviews, while ushering in the differentiation of cultural value spheres and allowing for the development of modern structures of consciousness, also meant that the meaning-giving unity of these religious world-views lost its legitimacy, thereby falling apart. As a result, these spheres of life drift “into the tensions with one another which remain hidden in the originally naïve relation to the external world”.

According to Weber, the value rationality generated by the Protestant ethic could not hold its ground in the light of the development of sub-systems of purposive rational
action (state administration and the market). The laws governing capitalist expansion and the widening of state power (through bureaucratisation) helped to expand these sub-systems, and as a result, sounded the death-knell for the value-rational grounding of purposive-rational action in modern society. In this disconnection of purposive-rational action from a grounding in value rationality, Weber depicts a paradox in the process of societal rationalisation. Hand in hand with the development of the highest form of societal rationalisation (as in the development of sub-systems of purposive-rational action) comes the loss of freedom that arises when these sub-systems detach themselves from the value-rational grounding of the lifeworld.

So, for Weber, the loss of meaning that he perceives in the modern age owes its origin to the development of independent cultural value spheres. The loss of freedom, on the other hand, owes its beginnings to societal, rather than cultural, rationalisation. Summarised, the thesis of the loss of freedom entails the subsumption of the individuals under the bureaucratisation of organisations central to the economy and the state, i.e., the Iron Cage. These bureaucratic organisations comprise the autonomous sub-systems of purposive-rational action that were discussed earlier. For Weber, it is this bureaucratisation that provides the key to understanding both societal rationalisation, and the accompanying loss of freedom.

The question arises, however, as to why this development signifies a loss of freedom. What is being lost exactly? The key issue for Weber is the shift from a purposive rationality grounded in values to one without roots. The bureaucratisation of economic and administrative activities means that the purposive rationality of actions has to be secured separately from the values of individuals. The function of coordinating and regulating actions is assumed by the organisations themselves. This ‘liberating’ of subjectivity from a grounding in moral-practical rationality is at the heart of Weber’s juxtaposition of ‘specialists without spirit’ and ‘sensualists without heart’. The loss of freedom therefore derives from the inability of individuals to orient themselves to values due to the domination of means-ends rationality. Once the ‘rug’ of value rationality has been pulled, people are stuck on a never-ending carousel of instrumentalism, effectively doomed to live in a bureaucratically regulated world.

Habermas on Weber and Rationality

Such talk of dominating rationalities brings back memories of the Frankfurt school of Critical theory, in particular the way in which Horkheimer and Adorno appropriate the work of Weber to argue that the end result of the dialectic of enlightenment is to usher in a ‘totally administered’ world, one in which citizens suffer a loss of freedom at the hand of merciless means-end rationality. The conclusions of both Weber and the Frankfurt School were pessimistic ones. The work of Jürgen Habermas, a later incarnation of the Frankfurt School, however, endeavoured, most notably in his famous work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987), to reconstruct the ideas of the above mentioned theorists in order to provide what he considers to be a more effective ‘diagnosis of the times’.

In this regard, and as with the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas relies heavily on Weber’s analysis of societal rationalisation and its troubling side effects. Indeed, Habermas has argued that “neither of the principal components of Weber’s diagnosis of the times has become any less relevant … since he formulated them”
According to Habermas, Weber’s reliance on the model of the purposive rational actor is a significant factor which leads Weber to provide an inaccurate diagnosis of the times. In order to present what Habermas considers to be a more effective diagnosis, it is necessary to provide a substantial restructuring of Weber’s theory. This re-structuring was based on two grounds: first, that he emphasized the idea of purposive rationality to the exclusion of other forms of rationality; and second, he confused action theoretic and system theoretic concepts. To counter the first problem, he proposes the introduction of the concept of communicative rationality “tailored to the lifeworld concept of society and to the developmental perspective of lifeworld structures” (Habermas, 1984: 305).

In relation to the second problem that he identified in Weber’s explanation, he proposes a two-level concept of society, which would allow for both an action-theoretic and a systems-theoretic analysis of the process of societal rationalisation. Here, he introduces the concepts of the lifeworld – denoting the background consensus of everyday lives, the vast stock of taken-for-granted definitions and understandings of the world that provide coherence and direction to people’s lives (Welton, 1995: 141) – and the system – that aspect of society where political and market imperatives take precedence, i.e., the state administrative apparatus (steered by power) and the economy (steered by money). This two-level concept of society allows Habermas to examine the “growing autonomy of systematically integrated action contexts over against the socially integrated lifeworld.”

Having re-structured Weber in this way, Habermas could then tackle the core issue at the heart of Weber’s theory – bureaucratisation. According to Weber, bureaucratisation signified the institutionalisation of purposive-rational action. Habermas, however, argues that bureaucratisation “should be regarded as the sign of a new level of system differentiation” (Habermas, 1984: 307). It is the anchoring of the steering mechanisms of the economy and the state – money and power, respectively – in the structures of the lifeworld, which signifies bureaucratisation for Habermas (p. 307)

Via the media of money and power, the subsystems of the economy and the state are differentiated out of an institutional complex set within the horizons of the lifeworld; formally organised domains of action emerge that – in the final analysis – are no longer integrated through the mechanism of mutual understanding, that shear off from lifeworld contexts and congeal into a kind of norm-free sociality.

Habermas clarifies this bureaucratisation thesis on page 311, in terms of a clash between social and system integration, a clash which has implications for the loss of freedom thesis:

This constitution of action contexts that are no longer socially integrated means that social relations are separated off from the identities of the actors
involved. The objective meaning of a functionally stabilized nexus of action can no longer be brought into the intersubjective context of relevance of subjectively meaningful action. At the same time, it makes itself felt as a causality of fate in the experiences and sufferings of actors.

Weber interpreted the trend towards bureaucratisation in action-theoretic terms. For him, the paradox of societal rationality lay in the relations between two different types of action orientations, i.e., value-rational and purposive-rational action orientations. Habermas, however, is arguing here that bureaucratisation and the paradoxes that stem from it, should instead be understood in terms of a relation between two different types of societal integration, namely social and system integration.

According to Habermas, then, phenomena related to the loss of freedom thesis, now count, in the light of his reformulation of Weber’s thesis, as “effects of the uncoupling of system and lifeworld”.

Rationalisation of the lifeworld makes it possible to convert societal integration over to language-independent steering media and thus to separate off formally organised domains of action. As objectified realities, the latter can then work back upon contexts of communicative action and set their imperatives against the marginalized lifeworld. (Habermas, 1984: 318)

Because the media function independently of language, they are not tied to the communicative structures of the lifeworld, which are dependent on language as the means to reaching understanding. As a result, these media (money and power) allow the uncoupling of formally organised domains of action from the structures of the lifeworld, which in turn unleash their functionalist reason of system maintenance onto the lifeworld structures. It is this pathological side-effect of societal rationalisation which Habermas refers to as the ‘colonization of the lifeworld’.

At the same time, however, Habermas qualifies this idea by indicating (p. 318) that bureaucratisation, in the shape of separate formal domains of action, has to be seen as a ‘normal’ component of modernisation processes. Because of this belief, Habermas must make a distinction between normal (in the context of modernisation) and pathological forms of bureaucratisation; in other words, he must be able to distinguish the normal mediatisation of the lifeworld from the pathological colonization of the lifeworld. According to Habermas (pp. 322-323), it is only when the economic and political system, via the media of money and power, attempt to reify the symbolic structures of the lifeworld, that pathologies arise.

Only domains of action that fulfil economic and political functions can be converted over to steering media. The latter fail to work in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialisation; they cannot replace the action-coordinating mechanism of these functions. Unlike the material reproduction of the lifeworld, its symbolic reproduction cannot be transposed onto foundations of system integration without pathological side-effects.

It is this “systematically induced reification” (p. 327) of the symbolic structures of the lifeworld, that Habermas views as generating a loss of freedom. Although Habermas doesn’t provide a precise clarification of what exactly is being lost, freedom wise, it
can be deduced that he is referring to the loss of the ability to orient oneself to processes of reaching understanding. Putting it another way, the freedom to act communicatively is under threat from systemic imperatives, which, via the media of money and power, reify those structures of the lifeworld which are based on communicative action. Habermas (p. 326) terms this reification of everyday communicative practice a “one-sided rationalisation”, a restricted rationality ushered in by the process of capitalist modernisation, a process with origins in “the growing autonomy of media-steered subsystems, which not only get objectified into a norm-free sociality beyond the horizon of the lifeworld, but whose imperatives also penetrate into the core domains of the lifeworld (p. 327).”

Weber equated capitalist modernization and its pathological side-effects, with the process of rationalization in general. Habermas (p330) argues, however, that the process of rationalization, as identified in the secularization of worldviews and the structural differentiation of society, does not have “unavoidable side-effects per se.” Of course, by adopting this stance, Habermas takes a much different route from not just Weber, but also Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno. Rationalization, according to Habermas, is not inherently paradoxical; nor does it take the form of a reconciliation between nature and spirit; and nor is it necessarily a process of reification. Rationalization, for Habermas, is both the secularization of worldviews (the rationalization of the lifeworld) and the structural differentiation of society (the uncoupling of system and lifeworld), but where both purposive-rationality and communicative-rationality are given equal weight. The process of capitalist modernization, however, has utilized one type of rationality, namely purposive-rationality, at the expense of a rationality based on an orientation to mutual understanding. In the following quote, Habermas (p330) clarifies his loss of freedom thesis, and at the same time, distinguishes his theory of capitalist modernization and his theory of rationalization:

It is not the uncoupling of media-steered subsystems and of their organizational forms from the lifeworld that leads to the one-sided rationalization or reification of everyday communicative practice, but only the penetration of forms of economic and administrative rationality into domains of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social integration, and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action.

With Habermas’ reformulation of Weber’s theory, then, it is possible to view a way out of the overly pessimistic diagnosis put together by Adorno and Horkheimer. Habermas for some provides an alternative to a critical theory that can only take the shape of “a condemnation of the present, with appropriate political conclusions being drawn” (Schnadelbach, 1991: 20). Habermas himself set out to do just that, his critique of critical theory intending to “highlight the aporias in which a critical theory of modernity necessarily entangles itself” if formed only by Weber’s notion of rationality (Schnadelbach, 1991: 9).
Discussion: Bureaucracy and its Limits

The above account of what could be considered an obscure debate in social theory, entangled as it is in the more complex connections between classical sociology and Western Marxism, has much relevance for today’s heightened discussions on the future thrust of HE policy. Habermas’ reconstruction of Weber’s theories of rationalisation and bureaucratisation, simultaneously offers a critique of both the proponents of accountability in higher education and its detractors. For those who emphasise value for money, the development of a permanent auditing and performativity culture, and university as a means to an end, Habermas’ Weberian-inspired diagnosis offers a warning that limits to power are there for a reason; any destruction of these boundaries can only come at a cost, one that is not necessarily measurable, but potentially highly damaging.

For those who view accountability in education through a panoptican regime of truth lens, Habermas’ distinction between forms of bureaucratisation offers an interesting and possibly awkward parallel to the accountability debate. Overexcited notions of surveillance and self-auditing individuals, lose their sheen when placed alongside a measured account of management and the use of legitimate control mechanisms. It is difficult to see how some form of workable accountability mechanism could be constructed from such a one-sided view of state management.

Of course, the one-sidedness forms itself out of what is a one-sided view of rationality. Although this is not the place to discuss the broader complex debates over reason and rationality, the conflation of reason with instrumentalism finds its diagnostic offshoot in the conflation of accountability measures with a shadowy surveillance regime (however much that may not have been Foucault’s original intention). It appears that the (mis)understanding of instrumental rationality as the only rationality is shared by both sides of the current debate.

In contrast, Habermas’ theory of a one-sided off kilter rationalisation potentially offers a normative grounding upon which to deliver a measured critique of accountability. Just as significantly for our current discussion, the double-layered notion of bureaucracy allows the debate over accountability a potential way out of the current impasse, validating Burke’s call (2005:5) for a middle ground between autonomy and accountability, or “service without subservience.”

In this regard, the ideas presented here offer up two key implications. The first implication is the need to develop awareness of the reaches and limits of bureaucratic accountability. It is arguably the case that, using Blaug’s phrase, academics engage in dual-aspect activity, i.e., they operate at both the instrumental and communicative levels. It could also be argued that the university straddles the boundary between lifeworld and system, inhabiting the space where the ethics of care and accountability are most likely to come into contact/conflict. Bolan (1999: 82) makes the useful point that, while the “linguistic, communicative base of all rationalisation processes” needs to be recognised, modern public sector management requires the fusion of both instrumental and communicative rationality “in ways that recognise the dynamic processes of change occurring within each while being sensitive to the contradictory and often conflicted intermixing of each” (Bolan, 1999: 81).
In publicly-funded sectors, it is difficult to deny that a degree of accountability is inevitable, even desirable. Acceptance of such an idea is one reason why public sector reforms have often been met with ambiguous, even confused responses from professionals themselves, including academics. Such responses beg the question: what are the limits to accountability and the new bureaucracy? This question leads to another possible implication of the current study, which relates to the impact of this new bureaucracy on arguably the core professional relationship at the heart of higher education - that between students and academics. It could be argued that the new bureaucracy encounters, or should encounter, its own functional limits in the existence of this core relation.

While much of the literature on professionalism places emphasis on core values, core work practices or core identities, and how they are affected by marketisation and commercialisation, it might just be the case that the ‘fault line’ of accountability – in Habermasian terms, where system imperatives overstep their boundaries - can be found existing between the key people in this professional relationship, a relationship that by its nature is at least partially embedded in lifeworld values and practices of intersubjectivity, mutual understanding and recognition. If that is the case, the increasingly strident calls for replacing this traditional relationship with the notion of ‘customer’ might need to be more strongly resisted than is currently the case.

References


Evans, (1999) *Calling academia to account*: Bucks: SRHE.


2 Foucault’s ideas have proven popular in the field of education generally (Amit, 2000; Edwards & Usher, 1994; Pignatelli, 2002), with for instance, Carr and Hartnett comparing the discourse of managerialism instigated in British schools by the new right to a ‘moral technology’ and a ‘technology of power’ (1996: 179).
3 In Habermas’s words (1984: 340), there are three of these spheres of value, which themselves are connected to three abstract standards of value: the cognitive-instrumental sphere connected to the standard of truth; the moral-practical sphere connected to the standard of normative rightness; and the aesthetic-expressive sphere, connected to the standard of beauty or authenticity.
4 Such a Habermas-inspired reading of the new managerialist, new bureaucratic regime in education has already been put forward by a number of commentators (Aper, 2002; Endres, 2006), concerned as they are with the corrosive effects of hyper-instrumentalism on communicative reason in the educational arena. In a similar fashion to Morley, Aper acknowledges the value of accountability measures in relation to “interpreting and acting on information about learning and performance (2002: 16). It is when, following Habermas, that these measures override the “processes and values of the lifeworld”, that problems can arise. Aper argues that “no amount of tests, reporting requirements, analyses, or penalties can alone cultivate a democratic and caring lifeworld in a school, because they press the organisation towards this compliance orientation” (2002: 17).

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