

Browne's Capgas Delusion: The Destruction of the Public University

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Abstract

The recent publication of the UK government's Browne Review 2010 on university and student funding signifies a massive step towards embedding capitalist free-market consumerist values and practices into UK higher education. This paper critically examines that paradigm shift away from public sector provision from the perspective of French Theory, of which the notions of reverie and hyper-reality developed by Bachelard and Baudrillard are respectively utilised. It is argued that student consumerism characterised by end products (credentials), edutainment coupled with duplicitous appearance signifies a deeply compromised knowledge and moral circumstance. It entrenches existing academic trajectories towards market competition and audit culture. Browne's higher education landscape will be characterised by the post-modern 'simulacra university', surreal while paradoxically continuing a physical presence.

The enforced adoption of a neo-liberal culture requires the University and its knowledge workers to lose the poetic space of reverie and critique. Academics will become a subjugated modern peasantry working in a globalised hyper-real of uniformity and conformity. This means institutions and academics will be alienated from an organic, intellectually autonomous and inter-subjective space for understanding, learning and serendipity. Instead they are being force marched into a state of no authentically rooted meaning or internal philosophical reference apart from those of the destructive cash-nexus of a de-regulated capitalist market. The consequences and implications of this arid development and its underlying philosophy in neo-liberalism for the life of the mind and society are critically exposed.

Key words: Bachelard, Baudrillard, consumerism, higher education, Browne Report, education policy.

Taking apart the public university

“De cette Maison, le philosophe a pu écrire: ‘Elle est une des plus grandes puissances d’intégration pour la pensée, les souvenirs, les rêves de l’homme...Elle maintient l’homme à travers les orages du ciel et de la terre ...Elle est corps et âme’. Cette maison disparaît. On ne sait plus, on ne peut plus en construire.”¹

(Translation, Appendix 1)

(Lefebvre, 1967:161)

“...What is at stake is whether universities in the future are to be thought of as having a public cultural role partly sustained by public support, or whether we move further towards redefining them in terms of a purely economic calculation of value and a wholly individualistic conception of ‘consumer satisfaction.’”

(Collini, 2010)

Introduction

Academic analysis should be a pilgrimage towards deconstruction, a journey which unmasks. At best it should undermine the 'false consciousness', which Marx believed, imprisoned humanity, especially the working classes. In unmasking the 'Browne doctrine' we engage our reader on that critical pilgrimage. The perspective of our explicitly anti neo-liberal paper is to argue that a fundamental incompatibility exists between, on the one hand the consumerist milieu being enforced through the Browne Report (2010), called "Securing A Sustainable Future For Higher Education" and, on the other hand, the nature of education as a precious, but inherently fragile source of critical thinking and sense making. Hill (2003) supports our thesis that neo-liberal reforms lead to "a loss of critical thought within a culture of performativity."

While his insight is valid, and now widely accepted, reforms of that nature will also affect stratification and therefore social justice. Many working-class people will be more prone to shy away from incurring a burden of huge financial debt for which they may experience greater relative hardship in repaying because their networks are unlikely to offer as lucrative employment opportunities as those available to the other social strata. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2010, 211) concluded that "the class mobility regime ... captures the continuity in economic advantage and disadvantage that persists across generations" and they reported working-class social mobility is largely stagnant. Class mobility is likely to worsen under the Browne attack on the public sector which is inconsistent with UK Government's apparent policy to improve social justice and mobility. Class differentiation within higher education will, in addition, emerge more strongly as providers will vary in the fees they set. Recent press report headlines (The Scotsman, 13/9/11) indicate Russell Group universities in Scotland, St. Andrews and Edinburgh intend to charge the maximum 9K per year fees for an undergraduate degree. It is not far fetched to assume working-class students will attend those two universities in even lower numbers than they currently do. This pattern of class differentiation mimics a previous universe of UK schooling when grammar schools and secondary moderns existed. Each school type catered for contrasting social strata.

The 'sustainable future' corporate jargon of Browne's text aims to please its intended neo-liberal audience, not build social solidarity. That document ensues taking an explicit intellectual or philosophical position giving us instead a putatively objective corporate audit of how the University, as a business will be run and funded. The ideological drive behind that document situates the University at the heart of the de-regulated global marketplace and, we argue, means the demise of the University as a critical intellectual space for students and academics. Universities will forfeit their capacity for challenging cherished orthodoxies in society nor will they be capable of sustaining a new generation's sense of being committed to wider socialist ideals. Instead self-aggrandizing egos and financial capital accumulation will soon define academia's institutional habitus (Attwood, 2011).

The analysis adumbrated in our paper is timely: The Browne Report (2010) coupled with other paradigm switching policy changes affecting university research (www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/) will shift the university as concept and praxis into being a mere driver of the capitalist state and financial sectional interests. It, the university sector, will therefore become especially permeable to the commercial values of the for-profit business sector and its narrowly prescriptive concept of relevance and obsessive regard for evidence of performance in lieu of trust (Lyotard, 1978; Curtis, 2010).

Preamble to Baudrillard

The duplicitously neutrality of the phrase ‘sustainable future’ belongs with the discourse of reputation hungry image seeking which has been historically associated with the corporate business who devote capital to reputation management, but universities will soon adopt this obsession too. What the Browne dogma really aims to sustain is free market capitalism and its interpersonally competitive logics setting university against university in the struggle to capture markets and their income streams. That, as we argue, is the trajectory universities are being forced to obey by this official representative of the English government. We are not alone in our concerns about the type of devilry which lies within this slippery political spin resonating from the chameleon of ‘sustainable future’ discourse: Baudrillard (2003) argues globalisation means the market, tourism, technology and information.

This possibly irreversible cultural paradigm shift is, for Baudrillard, tantamount to the death of our existing culture, values and singularity. Out of this process of negative transformation are constant homogenisation, dislocation and fragmentation. Communities and identities will ‘melt’ under its intrinsically aggressive impulse to acquire and survive through success at income generation. The beast of de-regulation will coerce academic participation. In place of centralisation, upon which the ideal of a public good lies, we will find dislocation and instrumentality. Baudrillard states this is an: “omnipresent global techno-culture” ruling our lives and beings. We also argue, in line with French Theory, that the virtual academic culture which is manufactured through Browne’s ‘reform’ lacks depth. It is instead a culture of computer screens where a growing plethora of on-line degrees can be ‘accessed’ and global technological networks ensure connectivity, not solidarity, as Baudrillard recognised.

It is not surprising that Facebook was engineered in the US, a highly networked and globally dominant capitalist state possessing the world’s biggest online distance learning university. For Baudrillard “the violence of the global puts an end to the critical role of the individual intellectual. The social anthropologist Frankland (2011) discovered how even the lives of remote forest peoples in Africa are being destroyed by the tourism industry. Tourism’s mega-mass of multiple niche markets (Wheeler, 1994) are, if anything, underestimated by Baudrillard in their effects on re-shaping our world into a technopolis, a site of consumption. Tourism was reported, more than even a decade ago, as being one of the world’s most significant commercial markets (World Trade Organisation, 1999).

Commercialisation’s hegemony is already part of the university infrastructure as UK’s universities become very reliant upon mobile overseas students who not only wish to study, but also to ‘see’ the places around about. Through remaining to spend their foreign currencies they are welcomed by UK PLC becoming fresh sources of money for enabling regional economic regeneration. That kind of multiple use of the university as a higher education industry and platform for the tourist gaze is legitimated by virtue of its boosting economic development. Many critical intellectuals have documented the decline, mentioned already, of political and institutional spaces for UK intellectuals to debate matters of contemporary relevance (Furedi, 2006). The trends raised above are anathema to the true and defensible meaning of the Ivory Tower. Literary imaginaries describe the personal duplicities which currently pervade the urban interactions of financial industry employees (Faulks, 2009). Browne himself held a very senior directorship with a global petroleum brand prior to working on university reform.

It should not be surprising then that UK academics, including those in elite universities, are fast becoming a new peasantry living in this finance driven feudal order (Holligan, 2011). Baudrillard is correct in drawing the conclusion that globalisation's logic is designed to humiliate. It is fearful of any lack of homogeneity, finding the intellectual voice an undoubted threat to its hegemony, hence he states: "The establishment of a global system is the result of an intense jealousy. It is the jealousy of an indifferent and low-definition culture against cultures with higher differentiation..." Baudrillard (2003) calls the essay which we have just drawn upon "The Violence of the Global" a title worth comparing for its integrity with the discourse of the Browne dogma. In the latter case 'clever hands' have worked diligently on its wording and textual layout to conceal its symbolic violence. We describe the roots and future forms of that violence in the next sections of our discursive paper. We are not the first to recognise that education is being put up for sale.

Baudrillard in Slovenian grammar schools

Trnavcevic (2008) utilises Baudrillian concepts to illuminate market-led globalising logics destroying the political and social fabric of former socialist nations in Eastern Europe. She analyses how that symbolic violence, namely free-market fundamentalism, manifests itself in the changing grammar school system of post-socialist Slovenia giving rise, she demonstrates, to simulacra or fictional spectacles of genuine education. In parallel with our thesis on higher education she discovered Slovenian government legislative change sought to de-regulate the public sphere facilitating internal financial markets leading to education becoming only a consumerist commodity. In keeping with those values the minds of the school students also had to adjust, she found, to conform to a neo-liberal remodelling of the Slovenian public sector.

In addition, Trnavcevic (2008) describes that under the former socialist system, the goal of education policy was to create a "universally developed personality", meaning individuals who looked beyond their own egos and showed concern for the lives of other citizens and social solidarity. Ball (2003) refers to the policy change she documents as an endogenous form of market-led remodelling, where the vestiges of the public sector, metamorphose into the values and identities of the corporate state. Trnavcevic (2008) highlighted that Slovenian state schools were coerced by market forces to promote "enterprise-based behaviour." And by implicating school students in this cash-nexus the authorities then encouraged pupils to partake in self-commodification: During school open days they displayed themselves to parents as the tangible products of their school in order to sell them to potential consumers, other parents. Through contrived public performances, which the author deemed to lack authentic academic substance, these teenager pupils participated, she argued, in the manufacture of what Baudrillard (1983) calls simulacra.

Education was feigned in the interests of winning customers. Such subterfuge creates, Baudrillard (1983, 25-26) argues, a Disneyland imaginary which means that what one encounters is: "Neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. It is meant to be an infantile world and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere". Instead of being genuine educators this professional workforce in Slovenia transmogrify into being new professionals providing eductainment, a fictional spectacle of a repacked education landscape. The parallels in Slovenia with the intended effects of the Brown

Report demonstrate the expansive drive of the capitalist empire. And so we believe the object of her analysis of education policy simulcra in this Eastern European state are to be found in places beyond grammar schools and Slovenian towns, a discovery in keeping with the totalising character, justifiably imputed by Baudrillard, to domination through Western capitalism forms of globalisation.

Anti-Educational Programme

Bachelard (1969 Trans, 1994 Trans) argues architects should base their work on the experiences they will promote for those living in their constructions, not theoretical rationales with tenuous relations to user experience. He opposed technoscience positivism offering instead a phenomenological deconstruction of human reality. The effects of the Browne Report will be to reverse space for class mobility and the fostering of new critical generations. It will instead return our social structure to the class rigidities characterising earlier decades of the 20th century, as my earlier reference indicates is taking place. His sustainable future is in actuality the privatisation of public education. It is a profoundly regressive and conservative revolution which reverses the sociological progress made when higher education was free for all who had the appropriate school exam grades.

We believe this corporate take over of the public sector will aggravate further the declining social capital of the UK while giving birth instead to an aggressively instrumentalist disposition towards education and citizenship (Mroz, 2011; Attwood, 2011; O'Neil, 2002). Despite it being known that affluence does not breed contentment (Offer, 2006) the UK Government is forcing these political dogmas about how to achieve growth and value from academic study into the student's mindset. Only those with private means will have the personal capacity to select degrees in the humanities since others will be preoccupied with ensuring their studies yield economic capital to allow them to replay loans estimated to be around 60-70 thousand pounds per degree taken.

The psychological dispositions engendered by that neo-liberal economic imperative will drive the culture of the university sector into a new reactionary socio-political space. The mantra familiar to quality assurance regimes, 'student experience' will not refer to the life of the mind. That idea of study for the intrinsic worth of ideas and political ideals will vanish very rapidly from university campuses. Academics, through course designs and teaching and assessment methods, will be contractually obligated to meet employment targets for students set out in their employing university quality assurance brochures. Undertaking that labour process will inevitably destroy their academic autonomy and capacity to give intellectually nourishing teaching. We are reminded here of the simulacra described emerging in Slovenian grammar schools: Surface will replace depth of learning.

Winter (2009) highlights identity schisms in academe around the imposition of corporate goals and performativity ideals leading to what Churchman et al (2009) call 'homogenised environments', places without intellectual distinction or distinctiveness. Younger academics may weather this encroachment on academia, 'Thatcher's Children', who are likely to become neoliberal subjects (Archer, 2008). We are not, as the reader can no doubt judge, as sanguine as some academic analysts who believe that through their own agency they can continue to carve out space for critical thought (Clegg, 2008).

Encroachment by Financial World Metrics

Higher Education, as a space for enquiring and learning about the unknown and the world, undoubtedly enters a state of anxiety and despair, especially in Europe and North America. Current austerity measures in governments' budgets for higher education creates a 'higher education crisis' in many countries both in Europe and North America. Recent student riots in London and other European capitals, France, UK, Greece, Germany, Italy and Denmark demonstrate not just the sense of how deep the privatisation of universities will be, but also students sense of humiliation due to government policies perceived as attempting to mislead them through vacuous political rhetoric.

In the case of the UK universities are facing a budget cut of more than £500 million from the Coalition Tory-led Government in the 2010-11 academic years. This reflects in an ongoing process of large numbers of job cuts in almost all UK universities. It is estimated that for the next 3 years (2011 to 2014), there will be 5% of funding cuts each year for universities. The capital grant for buildings is being reduced to 30-50%. In the case of Scottish universities, apart from total 15% of university funding cut for the next 3 years, another 10% of reduction in the "unit of teaching resource" has been intimated. This hasn't taken into account any extra measures that the new Scottish government may take after election time.

Concerns and serious questions are being expressed in academic journal articles (Ozga, 1998, 2004; Peters, 1989; Roberts, 2007), in specialised magazines like the UK's Times Higher Education and through various new initiatives, such as Public University initiative and The University as World Heritage movement, about the probable nature of higher education institutions as they emerge after the Browne political treatise application. It has been estimated that some students will have debts of effectively 80K to pay off during their working life-span, equivalent to a 'second mortgage' on their job salary. These are permanent shifts in society aimed, not merely at universities or education in general, but instead at a fundamental re-design of the welfare state by embedding a globalised market ideology into the public sector (Bohle, et al 2009). The Browne Report is effectively a discursive tool to engineer the demise of public sector universities.

French Theory: A Discourse Analysis of Browne's Report

We engage with French Theory through discourse analysis (Howarth et al, 2000). We employ French Theory (Breckman, 2010) to illuminate more theoretically the effects of the 'Browne doctrine'. Discourse theory "assumes that all objects and actions are meaningful, and that their meaning is conferred by historically specific systems of rule. A discourse is a social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify" (Howarth et al 2000: 2-3). A discourse analysis of the Browne Report reveals that the structural relation of universities to the state and civil society is shifting wholesale into the parameters of the West's consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998). Many of the leading critics of officially sanctioned, and we believe in the case of Browne's Report, politically subversive political developments, have been French intellectuals (Judt, 1994).

According to Breckman (2010: 339) French theory means those "thinkers and that body of work typically grouped under poststructuralism and postmodernism... Discourse, difference, otherness, decentering, absence and indeterminacy against categories such as universalism, origins, presence, foundationalism, teleology, and metanarratives: these have been the hallmarks of

French Theory”. The next part of our paper relies on French Theory, and presents conceptions developed by Bachelard and Baudrillard, reverie and hyperreality respectively. That analysis is followed by part three where we hope to demonstrate the irony of consumerism through the conceptual prisms offered by Baudrillard and Bachelard’s social theories. The ideas of Baudrillard (1994 tans, 1998 trans) and Bachelard (1953, 1958, 1960, 1961) offer a trenchant basis for unmasking seeming seductions of consumerism and for shedding light on how far higher education is travelling ideologically.

Bachelard’s Reverie and Hyper-reality

Bachelard’s critique is related to the importance of intersubjective space existing at the individual level. In banal terms we read this as meaning collegiality. Baudrillard dwells upon the phenomenon of concealment at system level. To begin with, despite Bachelard’s significant contribution to our understanding of poetic imagination and philosophy of science (Bachelard, 1953, 1958, 1960, 1961, 1971 trans, 1984 trans), his theory of reverie also provides insightful critique of mass production and consumerism from the perspective of literacy (Lane, 2006). The concept of reverie refers to a relaxed state of mind engendering a unique poetic space for serendipity to enrich learning. Waller (2002) describes the crucial contribution of serendipity in the history of scientific discovery. On reverie it is said: “On la (la rêverie) vit dans un temps détendu, temps sans force liante. Comme elle est sans attention, elle est souvent sans mémoire. Elle est une fuite hors du réel, sans toujours trouver un monde irréel consistant. En suivant « la pente de la rêverie » – une pente qui toujours descend – la conscience se détend et se disperse et par conséquent s’obscurcit. Ce n’est donc jamais l’heure, quand on rêve, de « faire de la phénoménologie »² (Bachelard, 1960 : 4). The reverie is therefore a state where the metaphorically awake and the dreamer meet, communicate and create (Bachelard, 1961: 54).

Bachelard’s notion of reverie has two significations: The first lies in the idea of intersubjectivity, and the second is its transcendentality. Bachelard used the idea of reverie to analyse the intersubjectivity between the author and the matter, the work and the reader, and the author and the reader (Gaudin, 1971; Castelao-Lawless, 1995; Thiboutot & Martinez, 1999). Bachelard described the intersubjective exchange between the candle, the writer and the work. He argued that the writer’s candle illuminates not only the place for the writer to work, but also the writer’s work itself. “Car la chandelle, compagne de solitude, est surtout compagne du travail solitaire. La chandelle n’éclaire pas une cellule vide, elle éclaire un livre”³ (Bachelard, 1961: 54).

Through a candle, a poetic space of reverie, which allows imagination to flourish, is created. This trope conjures the basis of academic autonomy and a student experience not undermined by financial anxiety and employability fears. This poetic space of reverie offers the possible intersubjectivity between the images, the work and the reader. For example, the “principle images”, “simple engravings”, “the reverie of the hut” are used in his poetry to invite readers to imagine the period of youth as a time when space existed to think and experiment (Bachelard, 1958: 47). These images allow us to access a world, another world, different from the materially constraining everyday one that we are experiencing, and which Baudrillard warns us about. Instead his poetic world could be ours in the depths of our being, he argues: “Il semble qu’en habitant de telles images, des images aussi stabilisantes, on recommençait une autre vie, une vie qui serait nôtre, à nous dans les profondeurs de l’être”⁴ (Bachelard, 1958: 47). The poetic space is also a space for imagined differences, the possibility of

worlds and worlds of possibility, and therefore opens up the “possibility of being”. It is not unlike the metaphysical journeys to other thought worlds encouraged by philosophy.

In the analysis of “houses and universe”, he described how the house is related to our being and our past: “En nous, elles (les maisons) insistent pour revivre, comme si elles attendaient de nous un supplément d’être. ... Comme nos vieux souvenirs ont subitement une vivante possibilité d’être”⁵ (ibid.: 65). The image, such as the house, is therefore no longer just an earthly subject. Its embedded transcendentalism allowing us to reach to the wider universe, the infinity, the eternity and the past, and arrive at a profound level of being. “Dans cette communauté dynamique de l’homme et de la maison, dans cette rivalité dynamique de la maison et de l’univers, nous sommes loin de toute référence aux simples formes géométriques. La maison vécue n’est pas une boîte inerte. L’espace hanté transcende l’espace géométrique”⁶ (Bachelard, 1958: 58)

It is therefore not surprising, given his ontology, that Bachelard criticised the technologies exploited to support the processes of mass production and consumerism. He reasoned that what underlies the exploitation of technology or “matérialisme instruit / instructive materialism” called by Bachelard (Lane, 2006), is not simply a different way of behaving or acting. It is the loss of poetic space and reverie. By rendering ourselves to a merely materialistic life-style we lose the possibility to explore and experience ideas of alternative forms of engaging with others, as well as knowing ourselves. The poetic space for intellectual life will likewise be excluded as a source of such poetic space because the humanities are probably going to be a main casualty of the Browne doctrine (Mroz, 2011; Attwood, 2011).

The meaning of the verb, ‘illuminate’, no longer has its organic signification when one switches to his concept of an administered light. It is the bureaucratic template to calibrate, for instance, intellectual performance through the formal government-led hierarchy of the UK’s Research Evaluation’s Framework. “L’ampoule électrique ne nous donnera jamais les rêveries de cette lampe vivante qui, avec de l’huile, faisait de la lumière. Nous sommes entrés dans l’ère de la lumière administrée. Notre seul rôle est de tourner un commutateur. Nous ne sommes plus que le sujet mécanique d’un geste mécanique. Nous ne pouvons pas profiter de cet acte pour nous constituer, en un orgueil légitime, comme le sujet du verbe allumer”⁷ (Bachelard, 1961: 90-91).

Baudrillard’s Simulations and Simulacra

Baudrillard’s argument is premised around the creation of a contrast between the hyper-real and the real. Also, by an announcement of the absence or the death of the latter, namely, the real. The hyperreal characterised by its non-referentiality, non-meaning, void, banality, claims to be the real, self-plagiarism, resurrection and models. It contrasts with the real - meanings, history, insurrection, evocation, a sensual rhetoric, the novel and the art form. Baudrillard argued that in postmodernity the hyperreal, with its inherent power to simulate reality, has replaced the real becoming the dominant and only efficacious system of social representation. Alas, this dominant system of signs misleads.

The hyperreality is therefore an ‘unreality’ which operates through meaningless signs and models of simulation, and asserts to be more real than the real. In hackneyed terms it has a parallel with the idea of political spin. Baudrillard used the idea of hyperreality to critique mass market forces characterising Western consumerism. The theory of hyperreality is built on a constellation of concepts such

as simulation, simulacra, implosion, deterrence and resemblance (Baudrillard, 1994). Hyperreality refers to a world where the referents and the sustaining human meaning is lost. In the hyper-real there is no longer any distinction between the real and the unreal, true and false.

The hyper-real is a postmodernist existential condition with the real being deposed by simulation. But genuine tensions re-emerge, and being perceived as insurrections they are swiftly neutralised by deterrence, implosion and hallucinations. “It (the hyperreal) retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is no longer anything, but its scaled-down refraction... The hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself” (Baudrillard, 1994: 23). The literary equivalent of this process of re-rendering our received sense of meaning is found in the extravagant depictions of society in J.G. Ballard’s dystopian fictional works. There, in Ballard’s dysfunctional world money and commercialisation warp perception altering how humanity relates to itself and the environment.

Simulation is defined by Baudrillard as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (ibid. 1). It signifies a pretension of having something that doesn’t exist. It is “a ‘consommé’ of the signs of nature set back in circulation -- in short, nature *recycled*” (Baudrillard, 1998: 101, original italics). Baudrillard condemned simulation for not only depriving power of meanings and referents, but also for its facilitation in the elaboration of sign systems and the deterrence of the real process that it manages to interfere with. The major aims of simulation are control and operability. One of the examples that he gave is Disneyland. He argued that by pretending to be an imagery world and by deliberately pointing out that the ‘real world’ is somewhere else, Disneyland paradoxically reveals and reflects the true reality, the omnipresence of childishness - the hyperreality of contemporary American society.

That society of pleasure, Disneyland, is governed by the impulse towards insatiable ego-centric consumption: “This world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere – that it is why the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness” (Baudrillard, 1994: 13). Simulacra, although closer to the real than simulation, are part of the hyperreal. The relationship between simulation and simulacra is revealed in the third order: simulacra of simulation (ibid. 121). Building on information, models and ‘cybernetic games’, simulacra of simulation are designed to fulfil absolute operability and control of any attempts to subvert them through hyper-reality.

Baudrillard introduced the concept of implosion to describe the disappearing distinction of boundaries between the real and the hyperreal, or more truly the invasion of the hyperreal. Meanings are transformed into signs and models of simulation. Implosion here therefore refers to the neutralising or pacifying process by reducing or collapsing ‘the gap’ between polarities of meanings and matters, such as subject and object, cause and effect this gives rise to the implosion of meaning (Baudrillard, 1994: 31). According to Boland (1995), implosion is “a process that leads to boundary collapses in a wide variety of circumstances. Implosion simply means that the boundary between a simulation and reality is erased, that is, implodes, and the basis for determining the real is gone” (ibid. 536). And, as intimated above, we are left with the University as physical presence.

Shopping Lord Browne

Transformations in funding higher education will alter society in view of the established ties between status, credentialism and the class structure. Baudrillard (2003) reminds us how the modern state is homogenising by making a corporation out of the University. The hyper-real, which will stand in the place of the real, will destroy reverie. The tools he uses to reach that goal are the dimensions of modern capitalism whose defining characteristics in neo-liberalism include the principles of US Free market economics: the best way to allocate resources and opportunities is through the market; the market is regarded as being a more efficient mechanism for the distribution of resources; a commitment to free trade; the abolition of tariffs or subsidies, or any form of state-imposed protection or support, as well as the maintenance of floating exchange rates and “open” economies between competitors; the self-interested individual where individuals are seen in terms of economically self-interested subjects.

By advancing that economic system Browne Report facilitates ‘simulacra universities’, whose aim is to simulate the private sector reducing the financial burden on the state and transferring it to taxpayers. The poetic space of reverie for enquiring and learning with the inter-subjective space traditionally found in the University will be replaced by ‘administered space’ where both the university as institution for teaching and research, and students and academics as explorers or adventurers are reduced to what Michel Foucault calls “docile bodies.” For students and universities that genre of politically compliant docility will not include being involved with capitalist market demands. In this sense the University concentrates on the delivery of capitalist agendas, concerning itself merely with ideas that it deems useful to advance commercialisation as a way of surviving in markets.

According to Bachelard the transcendental value of the educational experience offered historically by universities allowed students a time in their lives to explore the depths of being, experience the infinity and eternity, and therefore open up the potentiality and possibility of their being for the greater good of society. However, this free and poetic space of reverie at universities is currently at a critical point of reaching closure. The Browne Report replaces such space with a “consumable space”: It is administered for securing edutainment in the interests of securing financial viability and surplus value from academics. Browne states: “Choice is in the hands of the student. HEIs can charge different and higher fees provided that they can show improvements in the student experience and demonstrate progress in providing fair access and, of course, students are prepared to entertain such charges” (Browne, 2010: 3). The possibility for imaginative exchange between knowledge, academics and students disappears. In its place will be competitive deal-making about securing value for money.

Knowledge is parodied and thus compromised. Those ‘simulacra universities’ are like “Education Disneyland” - students are consumers to be entertained by ‘academic clowns’ disguised in the forms of Mickey mouse or one of the Seven dwarfs. The phenomenon of celebrity academics is likely to extend its market strength. There is no longer real meaning or signification in this kind of institution whose purpose is to serve, avoid litigation by parents and entertain their affluent offspring. What is left is only a façade of a University: its empty resemblance. It recycles and absorbs the idea of private business corporations. Meanings and criteria of relevance are all transformed into financial logics. Its aim, as Baudrillard pointed out is “total operationality”: Browne asserts: “What we recommend is a radical departure from the existing way in which HEIs are financed. Rather than the

Government providing a block grant for teaching to HEIs, their finance now follows the student who has chosen and been admitted to study” (Browne, 2010: 3).

Given the UK Government’s perspective on higher education policy the individual is represented as a rational optimizer and the best judge of his/her own interests and needs. As Browne argues it is expected that the student qua consumer will drive up quality. A commitment to “laissez-faire” is endorsed and promoted in the Browne Report: The specious assumption Browne makes is that the free market is a self-regulating order, it regulates itself better than the government; that assumption is made to play the role of a mechanism for evading its responsibility for what might happen next to the University and society, once privatisation is secure.

Some argue neoliberals show distrust of governmental power and so they seek to limit that power in order to protect individual rights (Burchell, 1996; Peters and Olssen, 2002). But in a society such as the UK with its glaring inequalities and poverty (Townsend, 2010) to exercise those rights in the UK will not pose a great challenge to members of the higher, more affluent social strata. To protect the rights of the excluded sections of society they must first be given the material means to exercise them in the first place. The Browne Report proposals move power from universities as well as academics to certain types of consumers, in order to better, it implies ‘meet business needs’ and foster ‘engines’ of progression that enable particular categories of consumer to achieve higher salaries and help guarantee existing stratification by class is protected.

Collini (2010) suggests that the way in which the block teaching grant is administered by universities in terms of courses and degrees will no longer either be under the control of the values of senior academics as received through tradition. The Report states that “student choice will drive up quality”, but this is not the experience of the US where the commercialisation of academia has meant quality has been severely compromised (Gusterson, 2011: 1-2). It is profoundly disingenuous to present this choice mantra in isolation from an analysis of societal and employment trends which will inevitably shape student choices in certain trajectories, for instance, those where they are able to generate the level of income required to re-pay their significant financial loans and tolerate high levels of effective taxation (potentially) throughout the lifespan.

Oxbridge (Cambridge and Oxford universities) and members of the Russell Group are charging students the 9K maximum fees per year (Exeter, Cambridge, Imperial College, Liverpool) which, coupled with maintenance costs, and interest rates will mean that choosing to go to university is a major financial commitment. It is life decision on a par with few others. The Scotsman newspaper (13/9/11) reported the University of St. Andrews and Edinburgh will charge the maximum fee of 9K per year for undergraduate degrees. The fact of that future financial burden coupled with employment uncertainties may, in the case of those individuals – a very significant minority - not networked into affluent social classes or other powerful formations will undoubtedly deter them from undertaking university studies.

Collini (2010) claims these Browne Report proposals are “in reality a disguised voucher scheme”. After borrowing the money on a loan basis the student is expected to spend it on the ‘service provider’ of their choice, according to Browne’s discourse. We do not believe, like others, that this major reform should be understood in isolation. It is a foundational plank of a raft of ‘reform’ policies to re-engineer the entire public sector through the internal commercial market competition practices which are being imposed upon the UK’s National Health Service. That pattern of commercialisation represents the globalization-induced shift away from the

democratic politics of the nation state towards new hegemonies imposed by globally extensive capitalist firms and their 'free' markets (Bohle and Greakovits, 2009).

Not only will the university sector be subjected to the power of a specific kind of consumer choice it is already in the midst of processes of internal strife and competition over scarce resources and prestige. A plethora of articles and letters during the past few years published in the UK's Times Higher Education magazine demonstrates that battles among competing university 'tribes' has been growing as scholars have also observed (Humes, 2011; Pirie et al, 2010). Others present a still more dystopian vision, arguing that the contemporary institutional landscape of academia is anathema to intellectual life and independent research (Holligan, 2011; Holligan, 2010). Collini, Professor of Intellectual History, University of Cambridge states:

"Browne is contending that we should no longer think of higher education as the provision of a public, articulated through educational judgement and largely financed by public funds...Instead we should think of it as a lightly regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choice, is sovereign in determining what is offered by service providers (i.e. universities). The single most radical recommendation in the report, by quite a long way, is the almost complete withdrawal of the present annual block grant that government makes to universities to underwrite their teaching, currently around 3.9 billion...it signals a redefinition of higher education and the retreat of the state from financial responsibility for it."

Howarth et al (2000:3) states that a political project of the sort Professor Collini describes: "will attempt to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or organise a field of meaning so as to fix the identities of objects and practices in a particular way." This process is political, it endeavours to draw boundaries between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' through the exercise of power to exclude those possibilities we examined through French Theory. Bachelard's "phenomenological depth" is incompatible with what Browne reveals through the dominant trope of that document. Its deeply consumerist hegemony is consistent with Lyotard's (1984) uncannily accurate predictions for university research as a form of performativity, it being judged not against Truth, but against its contribution to enhancing the power of the existing capitalist industrial order.

The 'student experience', a mantra pervading higher education policy documents, is being industrialised. In the Forward of the Browne Report (2010: 2-3) the characterisation of university education is stipulated in commercial terms: "higher paid jobs", "global knowledge economy", "best performing HEIs in the world", "competitive edge", "higher economic growth rates", and "choice in the hands of the student" which is said to represent "radical departure from existing ways in which Higher Education Institutions are financed", which is, as we have argued only a very limited aspect of what is being changed here.

The social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1986) characterises institutions as being able to think and forge the categories, self-knowledge and identities of those within. Scholars have already noted changing identities among academics as a result of neo-liberal steering (Olssen et al, 2005; Martin, 2010; Henkel, 2005). How the university markets itself to attract 'customers' will be critically important under the Browne reforms: they must respond to the apparent opportunities for "more choice, more opportunities" (p. 9) and the presupposition made that "Students are best placed to make the judgement about what they want to get from participating in higher education" (p. 25), but that sense of the benign must be seen through the lens of the

future burden of debt incurred for which they are bound to develop instrumentalist identities oriented to the employment niche most likely to be enabling of repayments.

Our analytic comments is not idle conjecture: It is mistakenly assumed, and without having done any critical interrogation of the concept ‘quality’, or formal research about the potential effects of commercialisation (Browne, 2010: 29) that “student choice will drive up quality”. Browne equates quality with “student satisfaction” on the same page in his minimalist Report. Constructed as effectively generic business degrees – degrees analysed to have weak employment outcomes, potentially in the humanities and certain social sciences may perish. Universities are required to set out in “Course information” brochures (Browne, 2010: 30): “Average salary in the first year after completing the course”, “proportion of students in employment in the first year after completing their course”. The diagrammatical text of the Browne document – one is a picture of books positioned beside a calculator with the word ‘earning’ - highlights these discursive instrumentalist world views to legitimate and attract expenditure by trying to persuade students of the possibility that their life-time earnings will be much more if they gain a degree. Moreover the university as a traditional site for the human and intellectual ‘play’ conjured by Bachelard will vanish.

Poetic space will be replaced by employment space. Academia will become more welcoming to ‘bean counters’ (Martin, 2010). The role of the university will focus more on skilling-up the future labour-force (Lebrecht, 2010; Martin, 2010). Shopping with Browne means the loss of that world of time alluded to by Bachelard where the mind had scope to explore and understand better what is merely contingent as opposed to immutable. Now our experience of time will become more intensely Max Weber’s bureaucratic time. The Marxist historian E. P. Thompson (1967) describes that idea of time as emerging during the birth of western capitalism when it replaced time calibrated by our observations of the natural passage of the sun and seasons.

Discussion

The title of our paper refers to a weird occurrence in a 20th century science fiction novel. In John Wyndham’s 1957 disturbing science fiction novel ‘The Outward Urge’ an astronaut develops the *délusion* that his colleague is a Martian. Known as the Capgas *délusion*, this is a misidentification syndrome named after Joseph Capgas (1873-1950), a French psychiatrist. Very soon academics will feel they are afflicted by it too. They will be mistaken. In fact an imposteur will have taken up position in academia: Universities will have become unrecognisable, intellectually, socially and politically. As others have argued in relation to the fate of UK’s state school sector (Ball, 2007) we conjecture that universities will become sites for a prescribed type of knowledge transfer whose primary focus will be upon securing and promulgating commercial values.

The consumer choice which the Browne Report promotes is very likely to differentiate, as stated above, by income and social class status variables. Even hard-nosed economists should have regard for the damage to national solidarity, especially in a time of austerity, which any further aggravation of glaring inequalities in the UK will cause. Browne ignores the fact that even non-members of the Socialist International would appreciate the key role that public institutions must play in capitalism, as Adam Smith understood. It is disingenuous to argue, as Browne presupposes that students are actually free what to decide what to study given the costs to themselves and their families in undertaking a degree with its accruing of

major financial debt. The depth of the McDonaldization of higher education (Ritzer, 2004) will grow as students struggle to identify degree courses that will be sure to mean they can repay these debts, as opposed to degrees which they would otherwise find offered intrinsic intellectual challenge, but uncertain job futures.

As more academics become research capitalists (Ozga, 2004) the public sphere will shrink, one causality being a source of institutionally based critical analysis. Universities will grow to serve sectional interests on whom they will depend for their income as central government reduces its support even more (Holligan, 2010). Said (2006) reasons the term ‘public intellectual’ “...has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely swept under the rug.”

In addition to the potential loss of critical voices a corollary of the effects of the Browne ‘reforms’ will be to cement historically given social class privilege and push the UK backwards in terms of inter-generational class mobility. Browne’s discourse of seemingly liberal and enlightened consumerism must be understood in terms of the effects on the privileging of particular existing social formations. It would be a remarkably naïve sociologist who ignored how the class structure and other structures of exclusion will re-calibrate the real impact of his reforms in ways that we have yet to see in broad scale.

In conclusion, the common good of humanity, or more particularly social solidarity and the removal of structural class-based inequalities cannot, we believe, be achieved through a university system that is being geared-up to be a for-profit system. The system, which is likely to emerge, we reason, is reactionary; groups who are historically under-represented in higher education will feature even less than now, especially at the expensive Russell Group universities. The Matthew Principle will receive a supply of fresh oxygen from Browne’s Report: Those who decide to study for a degree may find that it increases further their pre-existing and relatively greater societal advantages.

Finally, the UK Government’s willingness to sacrifice humanistic values is, we believe, damaging to the pre-requisite cognitive dispositions upon which democracy is nourished (Nussbaum, 2011). In lieu of populations which lack the critical edge and humanity that university education up until now has sought to promote such a society is likely to become significantly more vulnerable to the dangerous self-seeking of individuals and dysfunctional sectional interests. In brief the UK could be embarking upon a period of decline as a civilised liberal society. That negative trajectory will not be easily stopped or indeed reversed.

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Appendix

¹ “From this house, philosopher could write : ‘it is one of the greatest power of intergration for the thoughts, the memories, the human dreams ... It keeps the men from the thunder storms from the sky and the sol ... It is the body and soul’. This house disappeared. We don’t know anymore, we cannot anymore construct one like this.” (Authors’ translation)

² “We experienced it (reverie) during a time relaxed, a time without linked force. As it is without attention, it is often without memory. It is an exit outside the real, always without finding an unreal solid world. Following ‘the slope of the reverie’ – a slope which always descends – the conscience relaxes and disperse and as a consequence obscures. It is therefore never the hour, when we dream, to ‘do phenomenology’”. (Authors’ translation)

³ “Because the candle, a company of the solitude, is above all a company of solitary work. The candle does not illuminate an empty room, it illuminates a book.” (Author’s translation)

⁴ “It seems that living with such images, images so stabilised, we recommence another life, a life which will be ours, to us in the depths of the being.” (authors’ translation)

⁵ “In us, they (the houses) insist to relive, as if they waited from us a supplement of being ... As if our old memories have suddenly an alive possibility of being.” (authors’ translation)

⁶ “In this dynamic rivalry between house and universe, we are far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1964 trans: 47)

⁷ “The electric bulb will never give us reveries of this living lamp which, with oil, creates this light. We have entered in an era of administered light. Our only role is to turn on the switch. We are only a mechanic subject with a mechanic gesture. We cannot enjoy this act to constitute ourselves in a legitimate pride, like the subject of the verb *to light*.” (authors’ translation)

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