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Crowding New Public Management of the University's Horizon of Expectations

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Abstract: This article is a response to Asger Sørensen's vivid example of how neo-liberal university reform has subjected Danish universities to New Public Management (NPM). Sørensen effectively shows the noxious effects of NPM by discussing the infamous Koldau case, where newly empowered rectors, who served as centralized arbiters of university affairs, superseded academic decision-making. He concludes that one reason these cases have not been met with resistance by faculty is that they are paralyzed by radically conflicting normative visions of the university. In this article I respond to Sørensen by suggesting that conflicting normative visions need not be a disempowering condition and can in fact serve as a fertile basis of critiquing NPM. I suggest a model that draws on the history of the university and its shifting horizon of expectations to demonstrate how differences of normative vision have been successfully reconstructed and realigned in the past, often to constructive effect.

Linda Maria Koldau, the German musicologist at the center of the *Koldau case*, began reading New Public Management (NPM) literature to understand her difficulties since being hired to chair Aarhus University's Department of Music. After reading an article by the Dutch historian Chris Lorenz, Koldau "suddenly realized that Danish universities were a perfect realization of the theory" (<http://universitypost.dk/article/new-book-professor-slams-danish-universities>). Lorenz has contributed to a growing body of literature concerning NPM, a governing ideology heavily studied in British universities, but as Koldau suggests, may be applicable in unexpected contexts.

In "Visiting the Neo-Liberal University," Asger Sørensen (following Leon Lerborg) argues that NPM has at least two distinct variants. The first, *NPM market*, is defined thusly by Simon Marginson:

Higher education is conceived as a managed economy in which competitive markets and market simulacra are nested in a framework of external supervision by governments or, depending on the sphere of operation, institutional managers. (Marginson, 2008, p. 270)

It has been the sudden imposition of these market measures, especially competition, which has made NPM such a concern in Great Britain. Because Denmark has resisted such aggressive market incentives, this variant of NPM is not what Koldau recognized in her own university.

The other version, which Sørensen calls *NPM contract*, concerns the cultural effects of this shift on university governance.ⁱ Thus we can find Chris Lorenz and his colleague Grahame Locke noting a change in mentality in the modern university, specifically the eclipse of “*universal* – educational and scientific – goals,” in universities by “ordinary ‘private’ market or commercial logic” (Locke and Lorenz, 2007, p. 409). Weighting decision-making authority heavily towards centralized, efficiency-minded, and often non-faculty figures (such as the rector in Denmark) can have the effect of depleting the university of whatever resources it had to resist either the forces of marketization or the managerial structures of NPM contract. The disorganized response to the Koldau case amongst Aarhus faculty provides a glaring example of a culture depleted of such critical resources.

The handling of the Koldau case clearly exposes a dysfunction in Danish university governance insofar as proper channels for grievance, dialogue, and curricular decisions broke down. But Sørensen makes a suggestion that cuts slightly deeper, which is that “the Koldau conflict drew its force from the conflicting ideologies regarding the purpose of the university, primarily a conflict between the classical, Humboldtian idea of the university and a modern, egalitarian idea of the university, which I have chosen to refer to as the Diderotian idea of the university” (Sørensen, 2015). Humboldt and Diderot stand in for ideal types, the former signaling a focus on research, unconstrained academic freedom, and more “traditional” norms of academic work, whilst the latter stands in for education in pursuit of justice, a focus on teaching and the needs of students, and ideals emerging from the protests of the 1960s. As ideal types, these of course betray the subtlety of either Humboldt or Diderot’s writings on higher education,ⁱⁱ but they signal something important for Sørensen, which is the necessity of normative ideas in resisting the noxious effects of NPM.

I want to make two suggestions concerning the use of normative ideals in contemporary critiques of the university. The first, which I will simply state here without further argumentation, is that I am in agreement with Sørensen as to the necessity of normative ideals to critique NPM in both its market and contract forms. As David Preston has argued, the governing ideology of NPM evidences a post-enlightenment legitimation crisis, where the operations of capitalist management provide the amoral response to the breakdown of older forms of authority in the university (e.g., norms of academic self-governance, including the ability to set discipline-specific curricular priorities or internally adjudicate faculty grievances [Preston, 2001]). Normative ideals represent the necessity of re-injecting discussions of the university with some healthy moral/educational commitments.

My second point breaks from Sørensen, who sees a difference in ideology as a paralyzing condition when confronting cases like that of Koldau. Following Jeffrey J. Williams, I want to rather suggest that marshaling normative ideals should take the form of discussing the shifting expectations of the university. Doing so will expand specific critiques of governance to broader considerations of the university’s role in society as the economy, the state, and cultural norms also undergo significant changes.

In moments of perceived crisis, such as the Koldau case, there is a tendency to take up what Williams has called “ideas discourse,” which focuses on the history of ideas about the university as opposed to the variegated history of the institution itself (Williams, 2005, p. 56). For example, following Sørensen’s ideal types, disagreement within the Music Department often turned on whether faculty ascribed to the model of the research university (set by Humboldt’s University of Berlin) or the university as an instrument of justice (set by the adoption of Diderot’s ideals by the student movements of the 1960s). When disagreement is reconstructed in light of these ideas drawn from the history of academic self-reflection, then certain paralyzing features often attend discourse. The one most relevant to the Koldau case, and the faculty disagreement as represented by Sørensen, is a weak idealism, “weak because informed as much by rhetoric and narrative as explicit, logical means.” As Williams notes, ideas discourse tends to adopt rhetorical forms like the elegy, the jeremiad, or the declension narrative, all of which neatly project an absent ideal by which current failings can be registered. In the Koldau case this ideal foreclosed more immediate discussion of curricular reforms and incoherencies in the channels of decision making at the university.

As a corrective to ideas discourse, Williams proposes that we talk of the shifting expectations of the university. What he means by this is that universities have always been constituted by competing and sometimes conflicting normative visions, and what is important in instances like the Koldau case is to lay out how these visions are aligned with one another. Williams discusses five powerful sources of our expectations concerning the modern university: the university as *refugium* or *humanistic enclave*; the university as a training ground for citizens; the university as a center of vocational training; the university as a center of disciplinary research; and the university as a hub integrating the complex needs of modern society.

It is easy to associate each of these sources with episodes in the history of the modern university (e.g., the *refugium* with the Oxbridge model, and disciplinary research with Berlin), but the important upshot for Williams is to view the university as a site where competing expectations clamor for our allegiance, not as the necessary outcome of a path set by any one of these sources. Keeping these multiple horizons in view allows for a more expansive discussion than ideas discourse; for example, taking into account not just ideals of personal and civic cultivation, but also the necessary research function of the modern university and ties with industry. Moreover, keeping multiple horizons in view is a powerful means of resisting the narrowing discourse of NPM, which draws its justification from an economic and management rationale outside the university.

Given the limited space available in this article, I can only suggest ways in which shifting horizons of expectations provide a more expansive view than focusing on conflicting normative ideals. Sørensen concludes his article by stating, “ideas of the university uphold ideals beyond the demands of the market economy.” This I take to be true, though he continues, “when it comes to the specific ideas concerning the *raison d’être* of a university, these same critics diverge so radically that resistance to neo-liberal NPM schemes is weakened.” I believe a more effective base of dialogue is one that has an expansive and historically inflected understanding of the conditions under which these

normative ideas arose and how prior crises were mediated. In many cases, there is a serious need to reconstruct such ideals because of radical changes in the state and the economy, which may lead to convergence instead of necessarily leading to division.ⁱⁱⁱ This may provide a fertile ground for both critiquing NPM by providing a vision rooted in indigenous normative ideas for the university, as well as reconstructing certain ideals by noting the influence of changes in the nature of the state, the economy, and cultural expectations concerning education.

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Notes

ⁱ Sørensen defines NPM contract as “the management of a system of social contracts between partners.” The state is the main provider of funding, but it expects managers to deliver certain returns on that funding, hence managers optimize the relationships between different stakeholders. In the neo-liberal context of Danish governance this increasingly means fulfilling expectations, such as optimization and efficiency, that are more suited to the market than internal university governance.

ⁱⁱ Humboldt of course also introduced the seminar format, linking advanced research directly to teaching. But he also had clear civic concerns, as seen in the following description of what can be expected of those who have gone through a university formation: “He who has been thus freely developed should then attach himself to the State: and the State should test and compare itself, as it were, in him.”

ⁱⁱⁱ To give one example, Humboldt’s ideas, as substantiated in the University of Berlin, drew heavily from Romanticism, the German Enlightenment, and Pietism. But more importantly Berlin was founded before Germany became a modern nation-state and a capitalist economy. The Great Debate of 1919-1921 involved a long-deferred discussion of how Humboldt’s ideas may need reconstruction in these radically altered circumstances.