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**Visiting the Neo-Liberal University:
New Public Management and Conflicting Normative Ideas. A Danish Case.**

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Abstract

At Danish universities, the governance structure is regulated by law. This structure was radically changed in 2003, abolishing the republican rule of the senate consisting of academics, students, and staff in favour of an authoritarian system assigning all executive power to the vice-chancellor, or as we say in Denmark, the rector. To introduce the current situation at Danish universities, in the first two sections of this article, I will compare them with more well-known counterparts in other countries. This situation is reflected in exemplary cases, and in the third section, I focus on the most dramatic controversy ever encountered at a Danish university, the Koldau case, which reached national newspaper headlines and broadcasting in two rounds in 2011 and 2012. In the fourth section, I will interpret the case as an educational controversy in light of two conflicting ideas of the modern university, which may be attributed to two leading Enlightenment figures, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Denis Diderot. The conclusion is that to some extent,

the failure to resist the neo-liberal university reforms in Denmark and the UK, and the drama of the Koldau case, may be explained with reference to the conflicting ideologies of those involved in these controversies.

Introduction

At present, the classical universities are under severe pressure from the combined forces of a steadily accelerating and increasingly inclusive global market economy, and various attempts to cope strategically with the exigencies of this situation. The challenge is not just globalized capitalism, but also involves the political and managerial answers to this material challenge. Denmark is often thought to be well-governed, and thus well-protected against such threats, but things are changing, and especially when looking at the universities, the recent development is quite alarming.

To introduce the current situation at the Danish universities, I will compare them with their more well-known counterparts, primarily in Britain, but also in Spain. This is the content of sections one and two. Whereas, to a large extent, British universities must think of themselves as actors in a market for education and research, Danish universities still receive almost all their funding from the Danish government, and as public institutions, their governance structure is regulated by law. This structure was changed radically in 2003, abolishing the republican rule of self-constituting senates consisting of faculty, students, and technical-

administrative staff – back then occupying respectively 50 %, 25 %, and 25 % of the seats – in favour of an authoritarian system assigning all executive power to the vice-chancellor appointed by the board, or, as the head of the university traditionally is called in Denmark, the rector. As is the case with the CEO of a commercial enterprise, the rector answers to only a small, mainly non-academic executive board.

It is well-known that in some instances, British universities have closed departments, allegedly because of insufficient achievements, following government audits or owing to the demands of the market. I will claim that, in Denmark, even though the economy is often blamed, until recently the main problems at the universities were caused by the changes in power structures necessitated by the transformation from well-regulated state institutions to public organizations with more managerial freedom. The few university controversies that have reached the public are much more related to ideology, power struggles, and character corruption than to economy. At least, this is how it seems from the perspective of my own, rather wealthy, university, Aarhus University (AU), which is the second largest university in Denmark, with a core faculty of around 4,000, ranking between 50th and 150th in the world, on various university lists. My main descriptive focus will be on the Koldau case, a controversy related to higher education that took place at AU, and became the most spectacular university case

ever encountered in Denmark. Introducing this case is the content of section three of the article.

In section four I will interpret this case in light of two conflicting ideas of the university. In Anglophone discussions about the university, it is usual to speak of liberal education, and to refer to Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–90), for whom the university is primarily a "place of education", providing the individual with something of permanent value, the "formation of a character" (Newman in Maskell & Robinson, 2002, p. 25), and aiming to educate "the intellect to reason well in all matters" (Newman in Finlayson, 2012, p. 111). As Ronald Barnett puts it, the purpose is "civilizing gentlemen" (Barnett in Barnett & Standish, 2003, p. 222). Instead, I will employ ideas of the university more commonly known in Denmark, which may be attributed to two leading Enlightenment figures, the German philosopher and government official Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), and the editor of the original French Encyclopedia, Denis Diderot (1713–84). Today, both have been honoured by naming universities after them in the capitals of their home countries. The point here, however, is that for decades, at many universities all over the world, Humboldt's classical idea of the university has been challenged by another set of ideas of the university, and this second set of ideas I ascribe to Diderot.

All the above-mentioned ideas about the purpose of the university uphold ideals beyond the demands of the market economy, Humboldt and Diderot,

respectively, scientific knowledge and social democracy, or truth and justice. The problem is that these two sets of normative ideas may conflict. Confronted with current neo-liberal ideas of an entrepreneurial university, some of these norms may come into conflicts, the former set tending to be conservative, the latter typically more progressive, one idealistic, the other materialistic. In fact, their ideas may even undermine the legitimacy of each other. The Humboldtian scientist may be accused by Diderotians of ideologically protecting elitism and well-established class privileges, whereas Diderotian lecturers may be accused by Humboldtians of wrongfully receiving salaries as researchers, i.e., of merely teaching at universities without living up to their research obligations. Mutual critique of ideology gives good reasons for mutual suspicions, and the risk is that no real and coherent counter-force to the dynamics of the market forces set in motion by neo-liberal politics may be established. To this I add an analysis of the peculiar reaction of the Danish intellectual community, which is normally very critical of neo-liberal university management, and argue that, apart from various biographical details explaining local loyalties within the community, there is also a transformation of the notion of critique that might in part be responsible for the widespread silence among academics in relation to the remarkable Koldau case.

I will claim that in Denmark, the Koldau case forced a fundamental ideological conflict into the open. I believe that this conflict may be generalized to cover the situation faced by many universities all over the world. My descriptive

claim, and this will also be the ultimate conclusion, is therefore that the institutional development and the case encountered at universities in a small country in northern Europe are worth considering internationally.¹ Normatively, the conclusion is that if I have to choose, I have a bias towards the Humboldtian ideas of the university.

I. New Public Management at Universities in Denmark and Great Britain

From time to time, student protests reach the headlines around the world. When it comes to Great Britain, it is relatively well-known that one reason for such protests is the constant and very steep rise in tuition fees, which makes it more and more difficult for young people from ordinary families to enter good universities. In Denmark, where universities are free to all students who meet the entry requirements, student protests are scarce. Here, university admission is coordinated by a national system, and once matriculated in a higher education programme approved of by the educational authorities, students even receive state allowances sufficient to live on while studying. Thus, in contrast to Britain, over the years the Danish state has continued to provide very generously for higher education, and in the last decades, the state has literally poured billions into research to build up the nation's competitive strength in the global knowledge economy, and, as has been noted internationally, so far, Denmark has had 'remarkable political economic success' (Campbell, Hall, & Pedersen, 2006, p. xiii).

In general, Denmark has been favoured by recent developments in the global economy since the end of the cold war, but successive governments have also obtained additional free funding following various reforms in the public sector. The basic strategy is well-known, i.e., introducing market economy incentives to the public welfare system to optimize efficiency, while privatizing the basic national infrastructure, such as telephone, electricity, and public transport. Most of the funds saved by these neo-liberal measures have then been used for research, development, and education, leaving, if I may be allowed to digress, a considerable sum for tax reductions, and for the development of a very active and aggressive foreign policy.

In both Great Britain and Denmark, universities are often said to be subjected to a neo-liberal paradigm of governance called New Public Management (Kristensen, Nørreklit, & Raffnsøe-Møller, 2011, p. 7; Wright & Boden, 2011, p. 80). Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize some of the differences between the two cases. Among consultants working with these things, one thus distinguishes between two kinds of New Public Management (NPM): NPM market and NPM contract (Lerborg, 2010, p. 136). Employing this distinction as an ideal type, the reforms originally introduced at British universities may be considered a prime example of the former, whereas the Danish universities rather have become victims of the latter. Since the 1980s, UK universities have been induced to manage themselves by marketing their products – education and research – as attractive to

various public and private markets nationally as well as internationally, all of which may be expected to generate a considerable income. In Denmark, such processes are still in the making, and, as the teaching is in Danish, unlikely to be successful.

Most importantly, in both Denmark and the UK, the public sector is the main source of funding. In Britain, for decades, this funding has been closely tied to various kinds of audits, creating market-like incentives. Additionally, simply by being Anglophone, British universities are attractive to students from all over the world, and tuition fees have been raised accordingly, generating revenue, which has become a significant part of the budgets. Besides being favoured by the global market for education, English being the *lingua franca* of today's research community means that the UK, just as the US, can also attract the very best researchers, making their universities even more attractive to ambitious students. In contrast, Danish is spoken by very few foreigners, and even though our universities are generally relatively highly ranked, they cannot be expected to generate much income from the tuition fees of international students, or bench fees from visiting research fellows. Instead, Danes stick together to make the nation-state competitive in the global knowledge market. Already at the beginning of this millennium, that is, before the university reforms, Denmark could boast of being among the world's leading research nations in relation to the number of its inhabitants (Kristensen, Nørreklit, & Raffnsøe-Møller, 2011, p. 10), and today, with

a population of around five and a half million, Denmark's two principal universities are well-placed on most lists, between ranking 50th and 150th in the world.

In relation to NPM, the Danish case clearly exemplifies the second type mentioned above, the NPM contract, where the basic idea is to optimize public management through a system of social contracts between partners. The government provides the necessary funds for research and education, through taxation, and more recently, welfare cutbacks and privatization. In return, as specified in the contracts, the government expects certain goals to be reached, and standards to be met. As has been noticed, the universities are allegedly set free as independent entities, but in reality, their managements are tied up by a closely knit system of contracts (Wright & Ørberg, 2008, p. 27; Kristensen, Nørreklit, & Raffnsøe-Møller, 2011, p. 8). In Denmark, the contracts created by government officials, and not the demands of various consumer markets, are supposed to ensure the quality of research and education.

Whereas the NPM market may be expected to diminish public spending by leaving at least some of the regulation to the market, the second kind requires a complicated system of bureaucratic measures, and in Denmark, in spite of the rate of taxation being gradually lowered, there has been no real decline in public spending, probably due to what one may consider the reinvestment of public funds from various privatization schemes. As Gordon Finlayson has emphasized, there is a difference between the original conservative policy in Britain, aiming to

”reduce the economic *input* to universities”, and the policy of increasing ”their economic *output*” (Finlayson, 2012, p. 121). The latter became the politics pursued by New Labour, laid out in the Lambert Review of 2003, and it is mainly here that we may notice similarities with the politics pursued in Denmark at about the same time. The former has been employed only very recently, backed by the minister in charge arguing that we ”don’t want to overeducate our youngsters” (Esben Lunde Larsen quoted in Young, 2015).

To sum up the contrast, let me finally bring in Barnett. Although recognizing in general that the contemporary university may be said to have ”abandoned any calling to pursue universal reason”, he emphasizes the distinction between considering ”higher education [...as...] simply part of a market economy” and understanding the university as ”an instrument in the hands of the state for advancing the interests of the state in the global knowledge economy” (Barnett in Barnett & Standish, 2003, p. 224). Even though it is common to speak of neo-liberalism and NPM in relation to both Denmark and Great Britain, the cases are obviously different. The early neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s brought British universities onto ”the path toward marketization” (Finlayson, 2012, p. 121), forcing them to act as entrepreneurs in national and international markets. In order to make universities responsive to markets, through audits, the government created economic conditions that forced the universities to set priorities detrimental to the traditional ideas of a university, such as closing down departments within the

humanities and the social sciences, just because of short-term economic considerations. So far in Denmark, both audit and market imperatives have been weak. However, the organizational changes have been sudden and almost revolutionary.

II. University governance in Denmark and Spain²

Even so, I follow Finlayson, and in both Britain and Denmark speak of a "corporatization of universities" (Finlayson, 2012, p. 116). However, in Denmark the corporatization of the university was carried out by relying on the power of management, rather than by creating a necessity of the market forces. From a system of governance based on posts elected by senates at various levels, by simply changing university law we suddenly got a system of delegation of power from the board to the rector, and down. In Britain, as Finlayson affirms, in 2003 the Lambert Review recommended that academic senates be downsized, and the university run by a small board and a council with a "majority of lay members" (Finlayson, 2012, p. 122), and a model very similar to this recommendation was introduced in Denmark in 2003.

In the current version of Danish university law, revised in 2014, the tendency to require universities to organize as private corporations has become even more pronounced. Hence, the highest authority is the board (§10.1), which is

required to consist of a majority of "outsiders" with experience in "management" and evaluating "accounting" (§12.3). Only members from this majority group may be elected president of the board (§12.1). Members representing the university make up a minority group. The only specification of this group is that at least two of the university representatives must be students (§12.5), and in some cases, the result is that the faculty has only one representative on the board. The university board appoints the rector (§14.1), who then "hires and dismisses the leaders of the organizational scientific units" (§14.4). In most cases, this means that the rector appoints deans, and the deans then appoint heads of departments, who may further delegate, if it is convenient for the particular university. Below the level of the rector, however, the law does not specify the details of the governance structure. Together with the board, the rector decides the "internal organization of the university" (§14.7), and the important point is that rector does not answer to those employed at the universities, only to the board.

To spell out the above-described situation even more: Just as in a large private cooperation, at a Danish university all the employees are at the complete mercy of strategic decision-making that takes place at the various levels of management. Since Danish university funding is provided by the state, until recently it has been relatively stable, and in some years even increasing. However, when, for any reason, one of the budgetary units at a university has, or foresees, financial problems, it has gradually become customary to solve the problem by

dismissing employees. In Denmark, dismissal means being given three to six months' notice, to both the faculty, i.e., associate professors and full professors, and to administrative staff. Unemployment benefits amount to less than half the income of most university employees, and last only two years. After that period, you may receive social welfare support, which is even less, but only if you have no other resources: that is, only if your spouse does not have a proper job, and after you have sold all your valuables. Being dismissed as a specialized scientist in a small country such as Denmark is a real material threat.

I have no overview of how many people have been affected by the foregoing measures in Denmark as a whole since 2003, but looking back over the last few years at my own university, around 70 agricultural scientists lost their jobs in 2009, and in 2010, I, together with two other philosophy colleagues, was singled out for dismissal (Beiter, 2010), although without success. Thanks to supportive people all over the world, there was a public outcry in the Danish public sphere, and we were reinstated (Geist, 2010), the fight in the media leaving scrap paper to fill a book of more than 400 pages. The public tumult created by our case, and the fact that the case was first taken up by the ministry, and later by the Ombudsman,³ may have been the reason for the pause in budgetary dismissals in the following years, but in the winter of 2013–2014, the largest strategic budget cut in Danish university history was put into effect at AU, reducing the full-time positions by 388. The annual deficit was less than 2% of a turnover of around one billion US dollars

and had been known for years, but the recently-appointed rector and the board suddenly agreed that the annual budget should balance within one year, and that within that same year, a substantial sum should be reserved for strategic initiatives. Together, that created a state of emergency, a so-called *burning platform*, enabling the university management to take the extraordinary measures used in cases of mass dismissals. At the public meeting where the situation was explained by the rector of AU, a senior faculty member, a full professor of physics, proposed collectively lowering the wages to reach the budgetary goals, but that was flatly rejected (Øllgaard, 2013; Andersen, 2013). Instead, the whole university had to go through a three-month process over the Christmas break, singling out those who would carry the burden of the strategic management decisions. In the end, the goals were mostly reached through various kinds of retirement arrangements, but 128 of the faculty and the technical-administrative staff were dismissed, and the rest of us were terrified.

Please forgive me for spelling out in such detail the conditions at a contemporary university in Denmark. However, meeting university colleagues around the world has given me the impression that the Danish case may – so far – constitute an anomaly among civilized nations, and that it may be difficult to understand that these have become the normal conditions for employees at the seven universities in Denmark. Hence, in the winter of 2014–15, Copenhagen Business School (CBS) avoided layoffs only by making 67 employees retire

”voluntarily” (Gardel, 2015), but Roskilde University had to dismiss 24 people (Ejlertsen, 2015). Later, in 2015, at the faculty of social sciences at the University of Southern Denmark, 16 of the faculty had to retire “voluntarily”, and 31 more, 20 of whom were faculty, were selected for dismissal (Højsgaard, 2015).

Layoffs being now the customary way to handle economical challenges at universities, the situation has become even worse with the recent changes in educational policy, which now denounces over-education instead of hailing the knowledge society. As I write, in February 2016, the University of Copenhagen is facing a budget cut of about 10 % over the next years. Therefore, it has announced a layoff of 532 jobs, 7 % of the staff, and about one quarter of them faculty, and the selection has just taken place (Grove, 2016). As it was admitted by CBS when they had to explain themselves to the many foreigners among their faculty, in Denmark there is no tenure in the American sense (Hyldkrog, 2014).

As a contrast one may take a look Spanish universities. They have experienced extremely severe cut-backs since the financial crises of 2008, which put the whole public sector, including the universities, under the utmost strain. The critique of capitalism is therefore widespread, just as there has been criticism of the government’s authoritarian implementation of educational reforms as part of the Bologna process, equating “studies with work”, and thereby discouraging “passion and curiosity” (Palmero, 2012, p. 133). Still, as faculty, most Spanish university researchers are protected from dismissal by being employed by the state as civil

servants. Spanish public universities have also retained their autonomy and maintained an internal republican rule, enabling them to elect their own rectors and to decide internally how to cope with financial challenges. Instead of systematic dismissals of faculty, the most common response to financial problems has been the collective lowering of salaries (i.e., precisely the suggestion rejected by the rector in Aarhus), combined with raising tuition fees and minimizing all other spending: everything in order to save for the future the accumulated scientific knowledge embodied in the faculty.

Keeping existing staff is, however, not without problems. As the crisis continues, it demonstrates the incapacity of the universities to ensure careers to young researchers, and the average age of lecturers and professors increases year by year. In 2014 the 75 Spanish university rectors thus collectively appealed to the conservative government to seriously consider the educational opportunities of the coming generations (Álvarez & Vallespín, 2014), but their worries were simply rejected as “unfounded” (de Blas, 2014). In the 1970s and 1980s, Danish universities experienced a crisis like the current Spanish one, and the Danish faculty back then were able to choose a solution similar to the one currently chosen in Spain. However, for almost a decade that meant barring aspiring researchers from beginning their university careers in Denmark, and that traumatic experience became part of the argument for the necessity of changing university management in the 1990s.

In Denmark today, obtaining a position at a university as associate or full professor still means that you become a state employee, but during the first wave of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, the job protection normally given civil servants was given up by the Danish unions, in return for other improvements to working conditions. This did not appear that important an issue at the universities, as long as they were state institutions governed by law and ruled as autonomous academic republics, i.e., governed by the scientific community itself together with the technical administrative staff and students. Threats to faculty owing to management decisions related to budgeting became a reality in Denmark only after 2003, when republican rule was transformed by law into the authoritarian governance structure just sketched, and management could more freely set strategic priorities. As should be obvious from my remarks so far, the Danish experience of the university act responsible for this structural change may also be considered traumatic, although in another way. Recently, Denmark was thus embarrassingly placed in the bottom group in a comparative study of academic freedom in 23 European countries (Karran, 2007a, 2007b, 2009).

III. The Koldau Case. An Overview

So much for the general conditions for doing scientific work at universities in Denmark. These conditions are reflected in exemplary dismissal cases, such as

those just mentioned. Still, the single most dramatic case in Denmark so far has been the Koldau case, which reached national newspaper headlines and broadcasting in two rounds, in 2011 and 2012, and was documented by the protagonist herself in a three-volume work of more than 1600 pages – in Danish (Koldau, 2013, I-III).

Linda Maria Koldau is a German musicologist, schooled in the classics, but also experienced in placing classical music in a cultural and historical context. She received her doctoral degree at the prestigious Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and with her impressive production, in the spring of 2009, she was called to a full professorship by the dean of the humanities at AU. Owing to the new power vested in the university management, this was done without any prior public announcement of a vacant position, and the decision was apparently made by the dean without involving the local section of musicology (Koldau, 2013, I, p. 140; III, p. 128; Øllgaard, 2012). However, at AU, musicology was primarily focused on popular music, computer compositions, and contemporary cultural theory. Soon, it became clear that the newcomer from Frankfurt and the local section had very little in common, and conflicts began to emerge even during the first year. One set of problems related to Koldau's teaching. In Denmark, university teaching is regulated by a study board with equal representation by teachers and students. The study board decides the general curriculum of the programmes of study, just as every semester, the board reviews

and approves the specific courses to be offered by the programme in the following semester. This results in the study board having a strong say in what is or is not taught in lectures and classes. This form of organization is one result of the student revolt in the late 1960s, and so far, few have questioned it. However, one problem with it is that if a newcomer, such as Koldau, has research interests not shared by those already established in a section, it may be difficult at first to obtain courses or even individual lectures with content that matches his or her profile as a scientist or a scholar, even for a full professor. Since university teaching in Denmark must, by law, be research-based, and since positions are often filled according to the quality of one's research, and not its specific content, this is a real and well-known problem.

Space for newcomers is usually found either by handing over an existing course, or by modifying the curriculum of the programme to reflect the change in the qualifications of the academic staff. Coming from Germany, where full professors may decide for themselves what they want to lecture on (Koldau, 2013, III, p. 64), Koldau was not prepared for such a system. After being personally called from afar to become the only professor in musicology at AU, being told by a local programme director with few research credentials what to teach in already-established courses was a very strange experience. At first, Koldau accepted the conditions, even though classical music and history played only a very limited part in the local musicology programme. As she perceived it, the situation was

apparently open to change, since already during her first year, the curricula of the study programmes for both the bachelor's and the master's degrees in musicology were up for discussion and revision (I, pp. 216–17). However, ultimately Koldau did not find that any openings for her scientific profile were created in the process (I, p. 240), and after the first year, when the changes in the curriculum were completed with no real place for her, she could feel only despair (I, pp. 372–374).

Koldau's second academic year at AU did not bring any big changes in relation to her teaching. Apart from its being somewhat awkward for a professor to do very little teaching, in the existing management system at Danish universities, not teaching is also considered an offence that puts you at risk of being selected in the next round of dismissals, as one that may be easily disposed of. Her relations with the local programme director and to the local head of department thus gradually became more and more tense. She managed to discuss her problems with the dean who had originally summoned her, but the dean was about to leave office, and Koldau did not sense any understanding for her situation (Koldau, 2013, II, pp. 113, 423). She then tried to make an appointment with the new dean, but was told by her head of department that she might have to wait six, or possibly even nine months (II, p. 185). Desperate after almost two years of obstacles, problems, and misrecognition, she finally wrote to the rector who had originally greeted her upon arrival, but her perception was that he did not bother to answer her mail, at least not right away (II, p. 414).

It was only in the summer of 2011 that local problems in the small section of musicology at AU became a public case in Denmark. Koldau allowed a journalist at the leading intellectual weekly to quote her claim that the level of research in Denmark in musicology, and within humanities in general, was very low. The example that really caught public attention was that of one of the study programmes that Koldau had unsuccessfully tried to influence during her first year. In the version of the programme approved by the study board, one could receive a master's in musicology without being able to read or write musical notation. With this example, the story hit the front pages (Wivel, 2011), and suddenly there was a public outcry, in columns in the major newspapers, in the electronic media, and in letters to the editors from people with stories and opinions about musicology in Denmark. Of course, some of those participating in the debate supported the AU section of musicology, but the majority did not.⁴

The public clearly felt that there was something wrong at AU, but within the musicology section itself, Koldau was exclusively at fault. Without Koldau's knowledge, her colleagues managed to obtain a meeting with the new dean, at which they declared they would not cooperate with her (Koldau, 2013, III, p. 352). Still, the dean refused to let Koldau move to another section at the university (III, p. 22), even though Koldau herself had found a place that would welcome her (II, p. 170), and even though this is the traditional solution at Danish universities for such cases. Instead, a long process of forced integration into the

musicology section was initiated, two management consultants were hired, and clearly, the idea was to keep the case away from the media (I, p. 43; III, p. 222). However, the news media have their own dynamic, and in the winter of 2011, Koldau, now a celebrity, was offered an interview with a major national newspaper shortly before her 40-year birthday.

The interview caused the final round of public uproar. Even though there was little reference in the new article to the circumstances that originally brought her fame, the new dean told Koldau that she considered giving her a formal warning, with reference to her cooperation with the media (Richter & Rottbøll, 2012), and in Denmark such a warning is a formal and necessary step in the process leading to dismissal. Furthermore, Koldau was ordered to a kind of office arrest, being required to stay in her office during work hours, and to ask her head of department for permission to participate in meetings, conferences, and other academic activities outside the department (Saietz, 2012). Such an order is unheard of in the university world, also in Denmark, and Koldau reacted by taking this last development to the media as a violation of her right to free academic expression. Again, the media stood by her, and this time, even the Ombudsman declared that he would look into the case. Nevertheless, Koldau received her formal warning from the dean, the Ombudsman disgracefully bowed out, and in the spring of 2012, Koldau resigned from AU. In the end, she felt so intimidated that she chose to flee the country, and today she is a professor at the University in Utrecht, Holland.

IV. Conflicting Ideas at Real-World Universities

The Koldau case is an almost incredible case, and even today, I can hardly believe that it happened at my own university. Even more alarming is the fact that very few at Danish universities care to discuss the case in public. This is quite understandable, both when it comes to the university's management, which should be embarrassed, and when it comes to the academic staff, who have good reasons to fear repercussions. There have been examples of dismissals of individual scientist, who may have been singled out as troublesome, and only a few are willing to stick out their necks and risk being targeted in the next round of layoffs. The pervasive spread of this fear at Danish universities has been documented by union surveys of university employees (Højsgaard, 2014).

The problem is that silence is also the preferred reaction among many of those who normally raise their voices to criticize the consequences of the Danish university reform. The situation at Danish universities being as outlined above, there are, of course, critics of the current university law. However, when it comes to the small group of almost official critics, in the Koldau case, many of them have preferred to remain silent, and some have even sided publicly with AU management. Koldau herself concluded that her experiences should be seen as a consequence of the NPM employed at Danish universities (Koldau, 2013, III, p.

474–475), but few of the usual critics of NPM at Danish universities have been willing to grant her that.

For a long time, that left me puzzled, but I gradually reached the conclusion indicated in the introduction, namely, 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. Let me therefore reflect a bit, first with regard to the Humboldtian idea of the university, second with regard to the Diderotian idea. Still, there may be a little more to the curious silence surrounding the case. Therefore, in the third place, I will introduce, and criticize, a perspective that attempts to entirely escape such normative ideas.

a. The Humboldtian idea of a university

Humboldt is characterized by emphasizing that the university distinguishes itself from high schools and vocational schools by its relationship to science (Humboldt, 1810, p. 260 [X255]). The German idea of science comprises both the humanities and the sciences. Hence, the Humboldtian university's identity is grounded in the idea of science, "in the deepest and broadest sense of the word" (p. 255 [X251]), constantly stimulating professors as well as students to work at the limits of what is already known, "occupied with problems not fully solved" (, p. 256 [X251]),

combining ideas of the most talented young spirits with the well-founded knowledge of experienced scholars (p. 256 [X252]), and thereby, through both spiritual formation and scientific results, contribute to the development of humanity (p. 255 [X251]). A university thus understood distinguishes itself from the other educational institutions by offering education based on, and in close cooperation with, scientific research at its highest level. Therefore, in essence, the Humboldtian university is elitist, i.e., a place for the chosen few among researchers, for the scientists who are believed to be the best within their fields.

Humboldt emphasized the obligation of the state to secure the freedom of scientists as well as of students, from both the state itself and from the university as an institution (Humboldt, p. 259 [X255]). Only under these conditions could the university uphold its status as the place for the continuous pursuit of truth.⁵ This status is what establishes the fundamental legitimacy of the claim to academic freedom. Continuing this line of thought, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers specifies that the autonomy of the university implies that the university also has an obligation to be self-critical (Jaspers, 1961, p. 30). The only norm that science should obey is the truth, and this idea of science should be guaranteed by the state, not the university as an institution: “[The state] confirms the exterior freedom of the university, but demands the interior freedom of scientific research and all thinking related to truth at the university” (Jaspers, p. 29). According to Jaspers, the state thus has to protect the idea of the university from the corruption

of the real university (p. 30), and in the educational controversy of the Koldau case, the Danish state may be said to have failed to fulfil its obligations, since neither the ministers responsible for the universities, nor the Ombudsman, intervened. This fault of the state indicates a more fundamental problem that Jaspers also notes, namely, that the state may also fail at its task by losing interest in "the pursuit of the truth.." When the state considers the university merely another "useful state institution" for educating human beings to become "properly functioning part[s] of a machine," then the autonomy of the university, "if it still exists," must be defended. In the spirit of Humboldt, the university must insist that education for specific societal and governmental needs must remain connected to "the way of thinking suitable for the pursuit of truth" (Jaspers, p. 30).

The Koldau case involves both the problems to which Jaspers relates. However, whereas one problem – i.e., the corruption of the virtues of the academic republic – could, in principle, have been solved by the state's intervening on behalf of a properly functioning, autonomous university, the actual reality of the other problem – i.e., that of the state losing interest in the pursuit of truth – makes this solution, if not impossible, then at least improbable. The basic problem in Denmark is that the current Danish state sees no reason to grant the university further institutional autonomy; on the contrary, they want to curb it. The neo-liberal conception of the role of the state in society apparently reduces the university to just another useful state institution for education and research.

Jaspers concludes that a proper relationship between the university and the state cannot be taken for granted, and both sides "must remain watchful of the other" (p. 30), since individually, each may be expected to deteriorate in its respective role. However, the Danish experience in recent decades surely indicates that we are not dealing with equal partners. The relationship is asymmetrical, and the university has more to lose from a degenerating state than the other way around. A university neglected by the state, or deliberately targeted for instrumental management, for example, through NPM, may thus suffer detrimental effects after only a few years, whereas the large-scale effects on the state resulting from deficient and ineffective universities would probably be detectable only after a much longer period.

b. The Diderotian Idea of the University and Aarhus University

The students who revolted in the 1960s and 70s clearly took Jasper's demand for a normative stand seriously. The students were critical of the actual rule of the professorial elite and their proclaimed Humboldtian idea of the university. Instead, they argued normatively for an idea of the university that was anti-elitist, emphasizing the role higher education could play in raising the consciousness of the people, and thus improving social mobility in a modern, egalitarian society, at the same time furthering general enlightenment, social justice, and democracy. The revolting students and Critical Theory revealed how the Humboldtian idea of the

university could function as an elitist ideology that protected the privileges of the German mandarins (Ringer, 1969; Habermas, 1971, p. 244). Instead, the students wanted to focus on the possible emancipatory and political roles of university education, thus emphasizing ideals such as those just indicated, which may be ascribed to a social Enlightenment activist such as Diderot. For Diderot, what was important about the Enlightenment was precisely the development of social justice and political democracy (White, 1970, pp. 4–11, 123, 155), and from this perspective, the significance of a university can be only that it offers education to the citizens that further such matters. Constructed as an ideal type, the Diderotian university does not assign any special role to science and research, nor has it any strong ideas about them.

My realization of the importance of the distinction between the two normative ideas of the university was sparked by a remark made by Koldau. Koldau clearly and explicitly adheres to the Humboldtian idea of a university (Koldau, 2013, II, p. 142). Puzzled about the conflict, she suggested that perhaps the faculty of the AU section of musicology simply did not know that science could be something more than "academic education" (Koldau, 2013, I, p. 364). Having successfully broken with the classical musicology tradition during the student revolt (Koldau, 2013, I, pp. 364–366), the AU section of musicology faculty apparently took pride in a strong, unbroken, and successful tradition, going back to the 1970s, of developing study programmes attractive to the job market, primarily educating

high school music teachers and also people wanting to work within the cultural sector. When the conflict reached the media, these qualities were brought forth by many supporters of AU musicology. However, Koldau's arrival seemed to have revealed their blind spot, namely their lack of classical scientific research within their field. Hence, with Koldau on board, the musicology section could, for the first time, register enough publications to take the lead within the humanities at AU (Koldau 2013, I, p. 375). However, my point is not that the section was lazy before Koldau arrived, but that the two conflicting parties worked according to two different ideas of the university: Koldau was loyal to the traditional Humboldtian idea of research-based education, whereas the children of the student revolt employed at AU's section of musicology, in their practice as dedicated educationalists, were best described as Diderotians aiming for social enlightenment.

The basic problem for the Diderotians is that the faculty at Danish universities receive their fixed salaries as state employees, according to the Humboldtian idea of a university teacher, which assumes the combination of higher education and world-class science, and apparently the musicology section at AU did not sufficiently fulfil this assumption. Koldau's arrival made this problem obvious, and therefore she was not only a nuisance because of her scientific practice as participating in a specific part of the international musicology research community. Whether or not this was realized by the faculty of musicology, she also constituted a real danger, i.e., a material threat, to the local academic practice of

musicology, since she revealed her colleagues' shortcomings with respect to their obligations as employees at a publicly-financed university. This much I think may be argued, given the facts of the case; the next analytical steps require a little more speculation.

To continue the foregoing argument, I must make further stipulations and generalizations. Hence, in many cases, today's senior professors of the humanities at AU are those same students who first earned merit for criticizing the Humboldtian university as student activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and musicology in particular is said to have played a pivotal role in the local student movement of those days (Koldau, 2013, I, pp. 364–365). Presumably, the Diderotian ideology is very strong among the current AU university elite, including those with managerial positions (Koldau, 2013, I, pp. 337–338). Some of the public statements meant to support AU musicology seemed to confirm this. After Koldau's departure from AU, her former head of department, Niels Lehmann, thus defended musicology only in terms of higher education, not mentioning the charges concerning science at all (Lehmann, 2013).

This brings me to the final rounds of stipulated claims. Within the humanities at AU, some of the current senior faculty have thus maintained their original critical attitude, and therefore they are normally among the critics of Danish university reform as well as the managerial revolution and practices at Danish universities. For instance, this is the case of AU professor Henrik Kaare

Nielsen, a specialist in aesthetics and Critical Theory. However, when the victim of managerial abuse is an elitist scientist, swearing allegiance to traditional Humboldtian ideals, and conflicting with former comrades in arms, then the professorial critics, apparently out of loyalty to their Diderotian colleagues, lose their sense of direction, and some of their contributions to the public debate were simply outrageous. In a newspaper column, Nielsen, thus without supporting evidence, claimed that Koldau "deliberately tried to destroy" the section of musicology, and that the university management "had to take action" (Nielsen, 2012). This was followed by the chairman of the committee that evaluated Koldau prior to the call that brought her to AU, professor Svend Erik Larsen, now rejecting the idea that she should have had any special international status, and emphasizing that she had not been headhunted (Larsen, 2012), thereby apparently undermining his own recommendation of her in the first place.⁶ Finally, Lehmann claimed that Koldau had "dreamed about a time when professors could decide everything from the content of the programmes to the selection of Ph.D. students" (Lehmann, 2013).

Denouncing or ignoring Koldau became the norm at AU, not criticizing the university management. This is still the case, even though Koldau was, as I claim, factually and objectively a victim of managerial abuses previously unheard of in the Danish university world. This was quite clear to the journalists of the major Danish newspapers covering the case (Højsgaard, 2013), and to those who tried to look at the case objectively. During the first phase of the Koldau case,

former AU rector Henning Lehmann, re-elected before 2003 for more than 18 years, compared the current governance structure at Danish universities with the structure of the mafia, the rector now being the *padrone* (Lehmann, 2011), but in general, AU faculty and most of the other critics have either backed up current AU management, or kept silent.

c. The Postmodern Contribution

Now the reaction of the faculty could be simply due to misplaced loyalty and automatic reactions to what was perceived as the reactionary ideology of a traditional Humboldtian professor. This is certainly the case with regard to some of the faculty from the generation that experienced the student revolts. However, some of the critics who have remained silent are much younger, and here we have to look for alternative explanations. Relevant here, I think, is the fact that the idea of being critical itself has suffered a displacement over the past decades. Foucault thus deconstructed the idea of critique as being mainly determined by, first, its relation to religion and law, and then its relation to science and techniques (Foucault, 2007, pp. 46, 51), thus downplaying the social, moral, and political aspects of critique, and ultimately focusing mainly on the analysis of empirical aspects of the relations between “power, truth and the subject”, especially the famous “knowledge-power nexus” (pp. 57, 61). In this way, Foucault deconstructed the “critical attitude in the Western world” to become an object of descriptive historical studies, connecting it

to "religious attitudes", constructing revolts as causal effects of "mysticism" (p. 76), and thereby leaving out of the analysis all claims to scientific or political validity, i.e., truth or justice.⁷ Hence, as an activity, critique is perceived as merely analysis; as an object of such analysis, critique becomes unfounded complaints.

Today it may therefore be considered critical to suggest that such normative ideas about the university are just illusions that are best consigned to oblivion, and that silence is a proper response to such controversies. Employing the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor of "liquid modernity," in an age "that has lost faith in [...] universals", Barnett asks whether "we can speak any longer of 'the university'", implying that "the very idea [...] seems consigned to history" (Barnet 2004, p. 248, 2003, p. 567). This conclusion is supported by a Danish authority on these matters, Jens Erik Kristensen (Kristensen, 2007, p. 67), who states quite bluntly that, "the university no longer has any intellectual or ideal justification" (Kristensen, 2011, p. 43).

Jean-François Lyotard's classic account, *The Postmodern Condition*, already diagnosed the decline of the legitimacy of the university as the scientific institution *per se*. As he argues, the traditional function of the university with regard to science is to deliver the philosophical "foundation of all knowledge" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 57). The problem lies in the scientific legitimacy of the discourse that is supposed to legitimize science, i.e., the discourse of Humboldt, Jaspers *et al*. When science is conceived of as positive and empirical, then the philosophical argument

for scientific legitimacy cannot claim to be scientific. Through this self-reflexive argument, the “universities lose their speculative function” and their “responsibility to science”, degenerating into the mere “transmittance of established knowledge”, and thus educating teachers, rather than “scientists” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 65).

Teaching and education may be thought of as ways of legitimizing knowledge, stimulating both enlightenment and character formation. This is an essential ingredient of the idea of the university as a place for liberal education, promoted by Newman. However, for Lyotard, it is important to contrast such a legitimization of knowledge with Humboldt’s. Whereas the latter’s discourse emphasizes theory, science, and speculation, thus hailing knowledge as valuable “in-itself”, the Enlightenment discourse has a “practical subject”, i.e., “humanity” or humankind. Stressing the social aspect of enlightenment, Lyotard characterizes knowledge as a means to improve society, permitting “morality to become reality” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 60), less concerned about whether “reality is true,” as to whether it is “just”, thus basing the legitimacy of science on the increased “autonomy of interlocutors engaged in ethical, social, and political practices” (p. 66). Also, according to Lyotard, this discourse has lost its legitimacy, as it is allegedly based on inferences from descriptions to prescriptions, i.e., from “is” to “ought.” Hence, it is argued that both these discourses – famously called the “grand narratives” (p. 63) – have lost their legitimacy and may be relegated to the past.

I find Lyotard's way of arguing unconvincing: Contrary to Lyotard's claims, we do not have to accept a restriction of the idea of science to the empirical sciences – just think of mathematics! – and the discussion of the so-called natural fallacy, i.e., inferring from "is" to "ought," is by no means over. As Gerhard Schurz argues, even from a strictly logical point of view, "there is by no means agreement on this topic" (Schurz, 1997, p. 4). Furthermore, descriptively one finds both ways of legitimizing the university alive and well at today's universities. It is precisely for this reason that I have sought to displace Lyotard's diagnostic vocabulary to focus instead on the two normative sets of ideas of the university, the Humboldtian and the Diderotian, the latter name being chosen to signal a greater interest in social justice and popular democracy than can be detected, for example, in Newman's idea of the university. Returning to Kristensen's statement regarding the university's lack of justification, one can understand such an utterance as an emotional reaction to the contemporary weakness of the classical ideas of the university in relation to the neo-liberal idea of the entrepreneurial university, i.e., as an expression of sorrow or resentment over something apparently lost forever. There are plenty of examples of analyses of current developments in the university world that nourish such emotions. However, as Jaspers argues, "mental impotence is no necessity". Moreover, the experience of impotence is precisely a consequence of analysing the social development descriptively and affirmatively, instead of normatively and critically. According to Jaspers, the former approach generates the habits of thought

that he calls “sociologism,,” which mistakes the “relative perspective” of stating the facts for the “absolute knowledge” of “what should be done” (Jaspers, 1961 p. 22). As Jaspers puts it, accepting things as they appear may justify only passivity, “the irresponsible *laissez faire*” (p. 23). Certainly, such resignation and disillusionment concerning the idea of the university has a long history (Jaspers, 1961, p. 7) – one may refer to Nietzsche, for example, as do Foucault, Lyotard, and Kristensen (Lyotard, 1979, p. 65; Kristensen, 2007, pp. 59–60) – but that does not make it justified *per se*, and justification cannot be dispensed with when making an assertion, not even if it originates in the experience of despair. Even confronted with the frightening logic of a totalizing capitalism invading American universities, Chomsky (2015) is clear, in both his critical, normative standpoint, and in his attempts to justify it.

To further generalize some of the conclusions, and I will now be blunt, I think that somehow the aesthetic criticism of the 1960s and 1970s plays a role in the silent complicity of younger faculty members. Sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello have famously argued that radical cultural critique could be integrated into, and even stimulate, capitalism to further growth (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 246), because the ideal of artistic creativity, when placed in a scientific or political context, implies a kind of normative nihilism.⁸ With regard to the university discussions, some of the intellectuals inspired by Nietzsche and Foucault have thus developed an idea of critique that claims to have no normative

implications, but aims to live up to the ideals of a value-free analysis, thus employing the strategy of sociologism denounced by Jaspers. Hence, although they employ the term *critique*, they claim to be neither conservative nor social democrats or radicals, just intellectuals or scientists. With this concept of critique, they criticize the development at the universities in sometimes very impressive detail, although still refusing to criticize or even plead for substantial changes, thus transforming critique into analysis. Finally, when placed in managerial university positions, these critics seem biased towards the *laissez-faire* attitude described by Jaspers. Hence, they apparently do what they are told, sometimes referring to legitimizing discourses of the necessities and realities of the modern world, or to the competitive state, and denouncing traditional normative critique, i.e., ethics, politics and law, as unscientific and old-fashioned, using the historical development of ideas as an argument, and thus, ultimately, creating a scientist-neo-positivist ideology. As a result, the normative ideal of the artistic critique has transformed itself into an ideological tool for post-modern, neo-liberal management, including the varieties of NPM that may be experienced at universities. It is against this way of thinking I argue, employing Jaspers' views against those of Kristensen *et al.*

Conclusion: Descriptive and Normative

As mentioned in the introduction, ideas of the university uphold ideals beyond the demands of the market economy. The problem is that normative ideas may come into conflict, and sometimes even undermine each other's legitimacy. The Humboldtian scientist can be accused of ideologically protecting elitism and well-established class privilege, whereas Diderotian lecturers can be accused of merely teaching at universities, without living up to their research obligations. As I put it, mutual critique of ideology provides good reasons for mutual suspicion, and the risk is that no real and coherent social counter-force to the dynamics of the market forces released by neo-liberal politics may be established.

The general conclusion of the educational controversy analysed in this article is as follows: Confronted with the neo-liberal idea of the entrepreneurial university, and university reforms such as in the British and the Danish cases, many critics may join hands in analysing and even criticizing the overall development as part the commodification of globalizing capitalism. However, 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, and its effectiveness endangered. Neither in Great Britain nor in Denmark have the critics yet been successful in reversing the neo-liberal university reforms, and I believe that one reason is mutual suspicions and critique of ideology among the critics of neo-liberalism, some leaning politically to the right, others to the left, some arguing normatively, others simply analysing descriptively. I consider this to

be close to an objective fact. When it comes to the normative conclusion, Paul Standish is right to emphasize that the discussion of the university in contemporary capitalist society cannot escape "complex questions of social justice" (Standish in Barnett & Standish, 2003, p. 215). However, when pressed, I must ultimately admit that I believe the greatest threat to the university comes from such Diderotian considerations. Thinking of the university normatively, merely in terms of education, enlightenment, as "advancing public understanding in the world", or as society's "pathway to understandings", as Barnett puts it (2011, p. 64), blurs the authority of the university as *the scientific institution par excellence*. The university is, and must be, an elitist institution living up to the highest standard of science – in short: the truth. Without a commitment to this normative standard, one cannot argue to uphold a class privileged with academic freedom and tenure. The point is that without these privileged institutions, the pursuit of truth is greatly compromised, and put simply, truth is good for humanity.

It is this strong elitist claim that Barnett apparently tries to soften by subsuming research and teaching under the idea of understanding. However, in the end he also emphasizes the importance within the university, of "truth, knowledge and world," being "permanently on the table" (Barnett, 2011, p. 65). As he further recognizes, for such an endeavour argument is indispensable (p. 66). In the end, and in spite of his socio-ontological vocabulary, Barnett is not far from Habermas, the latter emphasizing that the "cooperative pursuit of truth" cannot do without "public

argumentation,” adding, however, that the “egalitarian and universalist content of the forms of argumentation” is not to be considered exemplary in itself. It only expresses the norms of the “scientific enterprise” (Habermas, 1986, pp. 716–17), not those of society as such. As Jaspers argued, the only role of the democratic state with regard to the university is to ensure that the university adheres to the pursuit of truth, and does not degenerate into just another corrupt local organization. Apart from this, the university must have autonomy, to ensure the academic freedom necessary for the uncompromising pursuit of knowledge.

Claiming the autonomy of the university may, however, be a very controversial stand in a contemporary democratic society. As has been remarked, in a Danish context, among both liberals and Social Democrats, anti-elitism often becomes anti-intellectualism (Kristensen, Nørreklit, & Raffnsøe-Møller, 2011, pp. 13–15), and my impression is that something similar is the case in the British Labour movement (Smith, 2002). Presently, there is little hope of reversing current trends in university politics, and this is indeed alarming for the future of the university as a real, existing institution, no matter whether it gets the idea of negating the market from Newman, Humboldt, or Diderot. As far as I can see, this is the general lesson of the spectacular Danish Koldau case, and thus it has universal significance, at least for academia, i.e., people connected to the university world.⁹

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Notes

¹ Since most of my references concerning the factual cases are in Danish, I have limited them to only a few. For those able to read the Scandinavian languages, let me refer to two extremely well-referenced works in Danish, where I address two different aspects of the Koldau case: first, an article, which reviews Koldau's autobiographical account of the case in relation to ideas of the university (Sørensen, 2014a), and, second, a still unpublished manuscript about the work environment caused by modern university management (Sørensen, 2014b).

² Quotations from Danish, Spanish, French, and German have been translated into English by the author, even though other translations exist.

³ The Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman is a publicly financed, independent institution charged with representing the interests of the public by investigating and addressing complaints of maladministration or violations of rights.

⁴ At least that was the impression from the letters to the editor in the Danish weekly primarily allocating column space to the first round of the debate. See *Weekendavisen*, 2011, e.g., June 10th, p. 12–13, the 17th, p. 13 and the 24th, p. 13.

⁵ In contrast, Marek Kwiek emphasizes that at the Newman university, where education is the main goal, freedom is not considered essential in the same way, since it is "important to teach the right things" (Rothblatt in Kwiek, 2008, p. 58). Furthermore, for José Ortega y Gasset, the mission of the university implies that "teaching of professions and the search for truth *must* be separated" (Gasset in Kwiek, 2008, p. 59).

⁶ It was these two very unusual columns that originally caught my attention, made me curious about what was going on, and provoked me to contribute to the debate (Sørensen, 2012a).

⁷ As I have argued elsewhere (Sørensen, 2013), confronting Foucault with Chomsky makes it obvious that critique inspired by Nietzsche may appear radical, but in a political context, such artistic and aesthetic critiques easily become impotent.

⁸ In Danish, I have discussed this issue in more detail, analysing the poetics of Nietzsche in relation to Foucault *et al.* See Sørensen (2012b, pp. 449–62).

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