

# On the Commodification of Educational Research



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## Contracting for Research

This chapter is framed by a recognition that all or most academic research in universities (I shall limit myself to this setting) requires some sort of funding and it further supposes that exactly how it is funded and on what terms and conditions might have some impact on the nature of the research itself. One can usefully observe some different models of these relationships between funder and researchers. Becher (1985) distinguishes five strategies which those paying for research use to control to a greater or lesser degree the research which is done. These include (I have slightly elaborated on Becher's account):

- (i) proprietorship: funders create dedicated research establishments in-house – maximising their control over every aspect of the research and their rights over the utilisation (or suppression) of the research;
- (ii) purchase: bought-in researchers commissioned by government agencies or private sector organisations under project contracts (which universities are increasingly anxious to win) – i.e. the sort of research relationship I am mainly concerned with here;

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This chapter draws on some of the sources referenced in a chapter in the author's *Philosophy in educational research: Epistemology, ethics, politics and quality* published by Springer in 2017, which also expands on the argument set out here in section "Research in the discourses of the knowledge economy" in particular.

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- (iii) prescription: the concentration and steering of, usually government, research resources through the designation of particular centres of excellence, which, once established may enjoy a significant measure of independence;
- (iv) persuasion and sponsorship: the identification and designation of a preferred theme and the encouragement of academics to put forward proposals for research relating to this theme (for example the EU Horizon 2020 programme)
- (v) pluralism: responsiveness to researcher demand – selection by perceived merit of proposals (cf. the UK Economic and Social Research Council open bidding process). (Becher 1985: 183)

Beyond these in terms of almost non-existent control mechanism he might have added:

- (vi) patronage: David's 'stage theory' interpretation of the development of modern science refers to 'a transitional stage in which aristocrats bestowed patronage on savants as another form of conspicuous consumption' (Mirowski and Sent 2002: 50; David 1991) Today research conducted by individuals on their own agenda under publicly funded posts in universities is in a sense a form of public patronage. Under this form of funding the individual researcher enjoys maximum freedom for 'curiosity led' research (though with only very limited resources), though universities may claim at least a share of ownership of the research if it should prove profitable. (Not an anxiety that keeps many philosophers awake at night). In a sense, however, the story of patronage has come full circle in a modern and highly sophisticated form that Lynn Fendler calls 'philanthrocapitalism', also referred to as venture philanthropy, creative capitalism, assertive philanthropy and impact investing, as developed by the Gates Foundation, George Soros, the Clinton Foundation, etc., and which she describes as 'the fastest growing source of funding for educational (and health-care) research in the USA' (Fendler 2016: 1) – a phenomenon which is readily recognisable too in the UK.

Of these funding patterns it is the second – the 'purchase' or buying in of researchers under contract – that brings us closest to the idea of research as a commodity that can be bought and sold or otherwise disposed of as the purchaser wishes. Some years ago a senior education adviser in Norfolk commissioned an evaluation by the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia of the local implementation of a new government scheme. He did not enjoy reading the subsequent highly critical report and proposed that it should go straight into the bin. When the lead researcher protested the advisor reportedly declared: 'I buy research like I buy a bag of coal and when I have bought it I expect to be able to do what the hell I like with it'. This, at least is my recollection of a response that I found disturbing at the time and one that has clearly resonated in my mind over a good many years. The terms of *education* research contracts with the UK Department for Education echo the same construct of research as commodity: they are couched in

the same language that might be used for the purchase of a suite of computers or of school furniture:

The Contractor warrants that any goods supplied by the Contractor forming part of the services will be of satisfactory quality and fit for their purpose and will be free from defects in design, material and workmanship. (Department for Education 2014: par 7.2.10)

Surely, research, or at least educational research, is *not* like a bag of coal or any other material commodity in some significant way; nor does a local government officer have the right to throw it in the bin, does (s)he? But why? This paper attempts to explore some important dimensions of this question.

## Research in the Discourses of the Knowledge Economy

In economies that rely increasingly on the generation and application of knowledge, greater productivity is achieved through the development and diffusion of technological innovations, most of which are the products of basic and applied research undertaken in universities. Progress in the agriculture, health, and environment sectors, in particular, is heavily dependent on the application of such innovations. (World Bank 2002: 76)

Clearly research can and does have commercial value and, when this is aggregated in measures such as GDP, economic value, providing its users with competitive advantage by helping them to produce innovative products, to improve on established products or reduce costs. Having access, and especially exclusive access, to such knowledge can make all the difference between commercial success and failure at the level of an individual company and, by extension again, of a national economy. The capacity to generate such knowledge, not least in universities; to own and control it (hence '*intellectual property*'); and to apply and utilise it ('*knowledge transfer*') has become a key responsibility of universities and, in the UK Research Excellence Framework and others that have followed its path, a measure of their research excellence. This capacity for research based innovation has also become a central element of the sort of '*knowledge economy*' that governments across the world in settings as diverse as the USA and Ethiopia aspire to create.<sup>1</sup> So commercial value and, at the macro level, economic value can be attached to research products, which can be owned, bought and sold like any other commodity. This '*commodification*' of research is a feature of a world in which, as Burton-Jones describes it, 'Knowledge is fast becoming the most important form of global capital' – hence '*knowledge capitalism*' (Burton-Jones 1999: vi) and subsets that

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<sup>1</sup>Peters and Besley observe 'an emerging consensus that development on the Third World crucially depends on developing a knowledge economy in which tertiary education has a double role to play: in the creation of knowledge and its translation for local conditions and also in the development of knowledge as human, social and intellectual capital. The form of development education advocated by the bank [i.e. The World Bank] for the third world does not differ greatly from knowledge development strategies adopted by the developed world' (Peters and Besley 2006: 25).

include, for example ‘bio-capitalism’ (Rose 2007<sup>2</sup>; Peters and Venkatesan 2013) . Universities themselves adopt this discourse: ‘When it comes to biotechnology’, boasts the motto of the University of California System, ‘UC means business’, and its income from industry sponsored contract research gives credibility to its claim. Thus a powerful discourse is developed around the idea of knowledge as a commodity with commercial and economic value attached.

This development is often described as the economization, or economic instrumentalization, of human activities and institutions, or even entire social subsystems. In this wider and more appropriate sense, academic commodification means that all kinds of scientific activities and their results are predominantly interpreted and assessed on the basis of economic criteria. (Radder 2010: 4)

Of course, as soon as one begins to value research on the basis of its potential to create wealth a particular hierarchy develops. Research in the fields of, for example, bio-science, material science or communications technology have enormous potential for wealth creation (though the costs attached may also be enormous and the outcomes far from predictable). By contrast, no-one would suppose that a fortune was to be made out of a nuanced reinterpretation of the Arthurian legend, a feminist reading of Plato’s Republic or an ethnographic study of Glaswegian bar culture. So, one of the consequences of this observation of a hierarchy of value in terms of the economic or commercial value of different kinds of research is differential investment and the prioritisation of different areas of research, not just by the private sector but also by government. Across the world STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) are being given priority over the humanities and social sciences in government funding not only for research but also for teaching. (Ethiopia, for example, is among those countries that have adopted the 70/30 principle in its support for STEM subjects compared with others in higher education).

But where does Education sit in all this as a field of research in higher education? I suggest that it suffers a double penalty. First, its research ‘products’ very rarely carry the sort of commercial value that might be attached to a new pharmaceutical product or a component for mobile phones. On this basis it joins the social sciences and humanities as a relatively low priority for research funding. But, secondly, and in spite of this, *it suffers by association with the discourse of commodification* which I have briefly described and which is applied without proper examination of the appropriateness of this discourse in the field of Education. Most of the published discussions of the commodification of research (e.g. in the collection of papers edited by Hans Radder 2010), focus on the commodification of scientific research for *commercial* purposes, but I am rather more concerned in the sphere of education with the consequences for *public understanding* of the treatment of research as a commodity. It is to the grounds for this unease that I shall now turn.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘A new economic space has been delineated – the bioeconomy – and a new form of capital – bio-capital’ (Rose 2007: 6).

## Challenging the Association Between Funding, Ownership and Control

I think we have to start by considering what are the fruits or, in the terms of the UK Research Excellence Framework ([www.REF.ac.uk](http://www.REF.ac.uk)), the ‘outputs’ of educational research.<sup>3</sup> At one level these are reports, published articles and books; at another level, increasingly rewarded by the UK Research Excellence Framework, these are demonstrable ‘impacts’ on educational policy and practice; between the two there is an available body of enhanced knowledge and understanding of some aspect of educational theory, practice and/or policy that points perhaps to problems in any of these areas and/or possible responses.

It is this knowledge and understanding on which I want to focus. Let us suppose that what research offers is something that helps anyone who has access to it to have a better understanding of education. Such ‘better’ understanding may as readily be a better understanding of the complexity of educational practice or a more critical questioning of what is currently assumed to be the case as a clearer direction towards ‘what works’ (on some criterion of what might count as working) or not.

Now, my starting point is to assume that this sort of knowledge and understanding is something that any member of the public has an interest in (in the sense that they stand to benefit from it) and that any member of the public has the right to access. If education is itself a public good, then surely understanding education and what may and may not contribute to its quality ought to be out there in the public domain? To follow Fuller’s distinction (Fuller 2010: 279) such knowledge is not just ‘for the public good’ (‘the technology that is provided exclusively to the rulers’) but ‘as a public good’ (a resource to inform democratic deliberation). As MacDonald and Norris describe very vividly:

We are not just in the business of helping some people to make educational choices within their present responsibilities and opportunities. We are also in the business of helping *all people* to choose between alternative societies. (MacDonald and Norris 1982: 10 *my italics*)

What might lead us to qualify this opinion? My senior education adviser is not alone in thinking (imbued with the discourse of commodification) that one important qualification relates to the matter of who has funded or paid for the research and the rights over the control of the research that flow from this relationship. But this seems to me to be a less than compelling argument – for several reasons.

First, government officers at national or local level might remember that this is not their own money they are using, but rather that of the general public, of tax payers at least. The officers are merely their agents, and if the argument is that access to

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<sup>3</sup>I shall not in this paper make a distinction between educational research and evaluation (as, for example, in programme evaluation, though I recognise that for some purposes this distinction could be distinction. Programme evaluation may, for example, have a particularly high level of political sensitivity and perhaps public interest compared with more fundamental and theoretical educational inquiry.

and control over research belongs to those who pay for it, then local and national tax payers are the ones that can claim that entitlement.

Secondly, in a liberal democracy (and indeed other forms of government) ministry and other officials employed by the state are or should be accountable for their actions. Research and evaluation focussed on local or national government educational initiatives, or indeed any part of what is happening in the public education system are all things for which they may reasonably be called to account, and research into educational policy and practice and its public availability is a key contributor to that accountability.

Thirdly (and I grant that this is a researcher's perspective) research into education or anything else is or should be conducted in a systematic and disciplined way with care and thoroughness and respect for legitimate ethical principles, but always under an imperative to see and to speak truth. This is what research is and does. These principles and purposes become distorted if the seeking and speaking of truth becomes subordinate to other considerations like protecting the minister's reputation or shielding junior officers from ministerial wrath<sup>4</sup> – a phenomenon that Elzinga calls 'epistemic drift'. (Elzinga 1985).

Epistemic drift may .. be interpreted as a shift from a traditional reputational control system associated with disciplinary science to one that is disengaged from disciplinary science and, thus, more open to external regulation by governmental and managerial policy impositions. The norms of the new system have a strong relevance component, transmitted from the bureaucracies to which the hybrid research community is linked. The bureaucracy thereby influences not only the problem selection but the standards of performance of research, standards of significance and territorial definition of the field or speciality in question. (Elzinga 1985: 209)

Worse – when the imperatives placed on university researchers to bring in income become associated with an expedient desire not to offend funders, then, as Stronach et al. (1997) observed in an editorial in the *British Educational Research Journal* the result is 'a shift in preoccupation away from "research" as knowledge production, to research as an entrepreneurial activity, a question of finding money rather than answers ...' (Stronach et al. 1997: 403).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Kushner and MacDonald speak from hard experience when they write: '... civil servant managers who commission evaluations are vulnerable to unfavourable judgements of the policies they are implementing or of the ways in which they have chosen to prosecute them ... They do not want, and will strenuously oppose, policy evaluation of a kind that could embarrass their superiors by raising questions about the validity of the programme rationale.' (Kushner and MacDonald 1987: 152)

<sup>5</sup>Elzinga suggests that research is more susceptible to external determination at different stages in their evolution and epistemic drift: 'during the phase in which a paradigm is being established and articulated the development of a discipline is strongly bound to the function of internal norms and regulatives – these determine the choice of problems and objectives within a research programme. This is taken to be incompatible – as a rule – with strong external regulation or determination' (Elzinga 1985: 208). This might be a fair characterisation of educational research, at least in the Anglo-American sphere of influence as the 'disciplines' of education dominated the landscape in the 60s and 70s. Arguably, as these disciplines have lost their authority in favour of what Donmoyer called 'paradigm proliferation' (Donmoyer 1996), and as educational research has become balkanised and hybridised, it has become more sensitive to external rather than internal regulatory systems.

So, there are moral, political and epistemic reasons for challenging the assumption that the purchase of research by government departments carries with it an entitlement to do with it ‘what the hell they like’.

But there are other considerations that may leave one uneasy about the idea that one can regard the fruits of educational research in this way.

## **Ethics and Ontology in the Commodification of Research: Educational Research As a Public Good**

I want to return to my consideration in the opening of the last section of education as a public good and, hence, educational research as an important contributor to that public good. And here I use the notion of public good not in the economic sense of something from which the public at large can draw economic benefit, but in the moral sense as something that can contribute to people’s capacity to lead a good life, for example in the way that Amartya Sen talks about people’s ‘capabilities’ (Sen 1999). It seems to me that something that can be described in these terms should be made available as freely as possible and that practices that circumscribe this freedom should be opposed. We are not talking here about issues of national security, on which there might be a case for some protection of research findings or even commercial competitiveness, but of education, something central to becoming fully human.

In writing in these terms I approach the thought that there is something in the very nature of education and the research which informs it which suggests that it is inappropriate to treat it as a commodity if the commodification of research is understood, in Brown’s terms, as:

the social process whereby a person or thing becomes understood as a ‘mere thing,’ as entirely separate from the people and that give it meaning. Commodities are seen as commensurable with each other through the medium of money. When academic research becomes a commodity, it loses any explicit association with either particular scientific communities or society as a whole, and it becomes reduced to a possession of individual agents that can be exchanged on the market. (Brown 2010: 1–2)

Still less is it appropriate to treat it as a commodity over which some people – in government or in commerce – can have proprietary rights that include the right to withhold knowledge and understanding about it from the public domain. The corollary is that there is something not quite right about a university putting such rights, such knowledge and understanding up for sale and in so doing consenting to such proprietary claims. Some things, perhaps, are not, or should not be, up for sale in this way, but be freely available to all. This is the uplifting spirit in which Diderot railed against those who sought to keep new discoveries to themselves:

Nothing is more contrary to the progress of knowledge than mystery. ... If it happens that an invention favourable to the progress of the arts and sciences comes to my knowledge, I burn to divulge it; that is my mania. ... Had I but one secret for all my stock in trade, it seems to me that if the general good should require the publication of it, I should prefer to

die honestly on a street corner, my back against a post, than let my fellow men suffer. ... We exist within such an existence so ignorant, so short, and so sad, that the vicar sparing his money and the philosopher sparing his discoveries, both steal from the poor. Besides, I think that discoveries are safe and valuable, only when they have come into common knowledge, *and I hurry to bring them in.*<sup>6</sup> (Diderot 1755, cited in Hilaire-Perez 2002: 142–143 my italics)

... and Diderot's indignation was a response to those who sought to keep secret only the technique of painting in wax!

The accusations against those who exercise proprietorial rights over knowledge and seek to keep it to themselves, or those who sell out to those who seek such proprietorship, do not stop there. Sandel writes of 'the degrading effect of market valuation and exchange on certain goods and practices' (Sandel 1998: 94). For Brown:

The commodification of academic research violates the distinctive ideals, habits of mind and institutional purposes traditionally associated with science. Commodification corrupts science... because exchanging scientific knowledge for money threatens the moral integrity, social purpose, and/or epistemic quality of science. Just as prostitution denigrates sex and bribery denigrates government, commercialised research denigrates science. (Brown 2010:263)

Half a century ago Theodore Roszak had already labelled universities easy readiness to sell whatever services that customers desired as a form of prostitution. In a stinging critique of 'the service university' (for which read in contemporary terms the 'entrepreneurial' or 'enterprise' university) he wrote:

"Service", by becoming a blanket willingness to do whatever society will pay for, has led the university to surrender the indispensable characteristic of wisdom: moral discrimination. So it is that the multi-versity progressively comes to resemble nothing so much as the highly refined, all-purpose brothel Jean Genet describes in his play *The Balcony*. (Roszak 1969:12)

For some ethicists and philosophers, the objection to the commodification of certain things is almost ontological in character. They are simply not that sort of thing and what they contribute to human being is incommensurable with notions of financial gain (Brown 2010): it is a kind of category mistake to regard them as commodities. To do so is not just a conceptual error: it is one that, as Sandel suggests, *corrupts* the object that is thus changed (Sandel 1998 and see also Brown 2010). The examples that Sandel gives include the commercialisation of prison services, the sale of babies, surrogate motherhood (for payment), the sale of human organs, the sale of

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<sup>6</sup>Meeton points to the paradoxical feature of 'intellectual property' that, 'the more freely the scientist gives his intellectual property away, the more securely it becomes his property.... Only when he has published his ideas and findings has the scientist made his scientific contribution and only when he has thus made it part of the public domain of science can he truly lay claim to it as his (Merton 1979:47.). In spite of his enthusiasm for putting his knowledge in the public domain, Diderot was nevertheless a staunch defender of copyright and had a long running dispute with Condorcet who rejected *privilèges de librairie* in favour of what today we might recognise as the 'public good' nature of knowledge. (Van den Belt 2010:195; Diderot 1763; Condorcet 1776). For Diderot, however, the reward to which the author of new knowledge was entitled was recognition and honour, so it was important that his or her name could be firmly attached to the work.



sexual services, ‘the marketing of “Ivy League” sperm’ (a new perspective for me on the financial returns of a higher education!), Some popular objections to the privatisation of public health provision or public education and the selling off of national heritage sites are of a similar character, i.e. these are the sort of things that belong in public hands to be employed for public benefit under public scrutiny, not things hived off for private profit. Similarly, ‘The substantive findings of science constitute *a common heritage*; they do not enter into the exclusive possession of the discoverer or his heirs. This means that the rights of intellectual property are extremely curtailed’ (Van den Belt 2010: 191, my italics). The argument in Van den Belt (and Condorcet) is against the exclusive ownership of ‘intellectual property’ (a term that Van den Belt prefers to avoid) by the discoverer, the scientist, or the researcher but rather to regard such knowledge as ‘a non-excludable and non-rival public good’. In the context of this paper I am more concerned about the claims to proprietorial rights of those paying for the research. But if the research cannot be owned exclusively by the researcher, then the researcher cannot legitimately pass over exclusive ownership to anyone else, nor can they claim exclusive ownership on other grounds, because, unlike a piece of furniture or a plot of land (to use Van den Belt’s examples) an idea is not the sort of thing that can be possessed in this way.

The law of patenting and copyright is interesting in the context of this discussion. First, it recognises some (but not all) products of science cannot be patented or copyrighted. For example ‘mathematical formulae, newly discovered laws of nature and newly discovered substances that occur naturally in the world traditionally have been considered to be unpatentable’ (Elias 1999: 70). DNA sequencing has been an area of dispute, though the Nuffield Council on Bioethics recommends that since DNA sequencing is essentially simply information about a natural phenomenon it should not be patented (Nuffield Council for Bioethics 2002). But also, ‘ideas’ cannot be copyrighted, only their ‘particular expressions’ (Elias 1999:107). Unlike most other things you might ‘own’, copyright and patents are not given in perpetuity. For different kinds of patent the duration is between 14 and 20 years and copyright expires after 50 years in most cases. All this tends to reinforce the idea that, for example, critique of educational programmes, insights into how children learn. Philosophical reflection on the nature of education – all belong in the public sphere, even if there are some restrictions on specific forms of their expression, *because of the sort of thing they are*. Let us examine this, as it were, ontological consideration in more detail.

## **Ethics and Ontology in the Commodification of Research: Research as a Gift – Or a Conversation?**

Should we, as some have argued, regard the outcomes of scientific research as part of ‘a gift economy’, which Brown compares with the potlatch of certain indigenous cultures: ‘a public economy in which the highest honours go to those who give away

the most goods' (Brown 2010: 265 and see Bollier 2002, Hyde 1979, Ziman 2002). In a book under the enticing title *The gift: Imagination and the erotic life of property*, Lewis Hyde writes about the commodification not of research but of art, with which there are interesting parallels. For one thing he sees art as something which does not start *ab nihilo* with the artist but rather as something that, as it were a gift to the artist as well as one passed onto others. 'Along with true creation comes the uncanny sense that "I" the artist did not make the work' (Hyde 1979: xii) – a view that resonates with DH Lawrence's 'Not I, not I but the wind that blows through me' (ibid). Research, similarly, does not start at the point at which the researcher begins to work on the project, the commission, perhaps. It depends critically on what precedes it, what is already in the public domain.

The public domain consists of a great, invaluable bounty of knowledge, art and culture. Its value lies in the paradoxical fact that it is openly accessible to all. It is priceless, indeed, because the shared heritage that constitutes the public domain is indispensable to creativity. Without the ability to draw on shared knowledge and art – to quote past creativity, to modify it as one wishes, to express it in new ways to new audiences – future innovation is doomed. (Bollier 2002: 119)

But in the kind of gift economy or gift culture described by anthropologists, the receiving of gifts is not the end of the relationship. The classical and enduring work on this topic was Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* published in France in 1924. He observed among other things that gift economies were characterised by three sets of obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept and the obligation to reciprocate. Hyde develops this notion of reciprocity by reference to an early settler's account of encounters with the indigenous population in Massachusetts. For this community the key requirement was that 'Whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead... The only essential is this: *the gift must always move*' (Hyde 1979: 4 – original italics). The notion of an 'Indian gift', as the settlers called it, stood in contrast with perhaps the 'white man's gift' which these proto-capitalists clung to as their own possession.

This fluid and ephemeral notion of possession resonates too with the account I have given of research as a conversation (Bridges 2014, 2017). In this I cited Oakeshott's view of our intellectual inheritance

As civilised human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on in public and within each of ourselves. (Oakeshott 1962: 199)

And I added:

In such conversational conditions, then, each participant arrives with a unique perspective, which is uniquely changed through the conversational encounter. But of course the conversation does not end there; it continues, perhaps with the same participants, perhaps elsewhere and with a different group, and ... it goes on even when we no longer take part, taking forward, perhaps, some traces of our own participation, though their source will almost certainly be lost among the myriad of voices which have shaped any one person's understanding at any one time. (Bridges 2014: 208 and see also Burke 1957: 210–11)

There are two sides to this sort of picture of research, both of which render the idea of drawing proprietorial fences round it, let alone possessing it, seriously problematic. First, as Caffentzis points out,

There is the history, the antecedents: 'Intellectual products are never far from the commons they are produced from,... The 'auteur function' in Foucault's evocative phrase, is no longer played in Foucault's evocative phrase, is no longer played by the isolated, self-sufficient, individual thinker operating like an artisan in control of his/her means of production. The contemporary 'auteur function' is increasingly recognising the communal and social nature of knowledge production. (Caffentzis 2008: 8; Foucault 1977)

So any research report owes much to what preceded it and to the wider community of scholarship, the enduring conversation and not just to what was carried out 'under contract'. 'The material production of knowledge now depends on a vast worldwide network of information, material and knowers' (Caffentzis 2008: 9).

But just as any particular set of knowledge and understanding stands in and depends on a conversation that goes back into the past. The conversation does not stop there. The ideas live on and get absorbed into a similarly wide tapestry of knowledge and understanding, contributing perhaps to new creativity. So who owns that?

Some research contracts try to address at least the first of these problems by distinguishing between 'background knowledge' (individual or social), that the researcher brings with him or her to the contracted piece of work, and 'foreground knowledge' that is developed through the commissioned work itself. The European Community project on European Educational Research Quality Indicators Project was one such. Contributors (of whom I was one) had to report on their contributions in just such terms and the Final Report (available at [www.eerqi.eu](http://www.eerqi.eu)) lists what the project refers to as 'exploitable foreground'. I don't think I was alone in finding this task impossible without colluding in a number of half-fictions and arbitrary decisions. Knowledge just does not divide up that way. Perhaps there is a particular difficulty for those engaged in philosophical work, but others, required for example to develop new software, developed programmes that built upon and were substantially constructed from pre-existing resources, even if there was a relatively discrete and tangible product.

## So What Are We to Do?

I have set out a number of objections or at least risks attached to the commodification of educational research under a relationship between funder and researcher that gives the funder 'ownership' of the research and the right to do with it what he or she wants. These have included considerations of a political character about a wider public's right and need to know both to inform their own decisions and to hold their political masters and mistresses to account; considerations to do with 'epistemic drift' and the erosion of the credibility of the research itself; and considerations of an ontological character which seem to render the conceptualisation of research as a commodity both inappropriate and corrupting.

So does this mean that as universities we should not enter into such contractual relationships? This is almost certainly an unrealistic conclusion, not least given that, according to a survey by the Higher Education Funding Council for England of *Higher education – business and community interaction* ‘income from contract research, where academics or paid to do a specific study, nudged up to £1.2 billion’ in 2012–3 (HEFCE 2014: par 7). We might recall Mac the Knife’s observation in the *Ballade of good living* from Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*:

I’ve heard them praising single-minded spirits  
Whose empty stomachs show they live for knowledge  
In rat-infested shacks awash with ullage.  
I’m all for culture, but there are some limits. (Brecht 1928 Act 2 sc.4)

All university research has to be paid for by someone: only the modern day equivalent of the ‘gentleman scholars’ with a private income – perhaps academic retirees – can afford to disregard such base considerations entirely.

One response perhaps is to acknowledge that one has to live with ambiguity in what is sometimes described as a dual economy. For Hyde the duality combines a market and a gift economy:

To state the modern case with more precision, ... works of art exist simultaneously in two “economies,” a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art. (Hyde 1979: xi)

On Mirowski and Sent’s (2002) account ‘Stanford’ economists also locate research in ‘two economies’, which have some resemblance to those described in the anthropological literature. The first is:

‘a highly idealised invisible college of scholars who operate only according to their own whims and inclinations, whose stature rest purely upon disciplinary reputation and intellectual credibility, and whose evaluations of the quality of research are so tacit and maintained in such multilateral conformity by the relevant reference group that the actual process of producing warranted knowledge can largely be left out of the picture....[The second] is the everyday corporate reality of proprietary information and market-driven research where the coin of the realm is not scientific fame but cold hard cash and success is denominated in tangibl products and patents. (Mirowski and Sent 2002: 50–51 and see David 1998)

Both, they add, need to co-exist.

But what happens if the second economy dwarfs the first? It is perhaps the collision between these two ‘economies’ that underlies the issues I have been discussing in this paper.

To return to Becher’s earlier set of distinctions – the question is on what terms should such funding be offered and received. For example, as Geiger (1985) argued at the level of government policy for scientific research, research funding in the form of research *sponsorship* on terms that allow large measures of independence (as provided in the UK by the research councils as well as a number of charitable organisations) probably runs fewer risks of offending against the ‘scientific ethos’ than other funding mechanisms that involve the *purchasing* of research.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Geiger argues, on the basis of case studies of government intervention in basic science, that as a

However, one may find oneself under a research contract of a more or less restrictive kind. What then? ‘At times’, suggests House (1980) ‘evaluators may have to resort to their consciences rather than to their contracts.’ Norris and Pettigrew (1994) offer a range of more subversive strategies for resistance to unreasonable contractual terms or their unreasonable application:

- (i) exploiting discrepancies between the contract and proposal
- (ii) appending to the contract statements about freedom to publish
- (iii) preparing the ground for the reception of bad news
- (iv) threatening to expose any attempt at censorship or suppression – especially to powerful people or bodies
- (v) getting reports leaked
- (vi) ensuring that short-term evaluative research is part of longer term and more general research programmes. (p. 12)

Any of these strategies would require fairly tough minded institutional support as well as tough minded and high risk researchers (Norris and Pettigrew qualify). A Times Higher Education Supplement leader on the reported repression of research scientists’ work on BSE (‘mad cow disease’ on popular parlance) pointed out, however, that the conditions of independence among researchers lie not just in their individual courage and defiance, but in the support they receive from their institutions and in particular the heads of those institutions’ (Times Higher Education Supplement 2000: 16). And yet, as the Leader goes on to point out, many academics have no more confidence in the commitment of their contemporary managers to support their academic independence (especially at the price of lucrative research contracts) than they have in government or other patrons.

But the support needs to run further. Universities undermine each other’s stands on these principles if they do not stand together. To this end it is important that research associations operate with a code of conduct that affirms strongly researchers obligations not just to those who fund their research (to whom they owe legitimate duties in terms of the rigour and care with which the research is conducted) but also to a wider public. The ethical code of the British Educational Research Association was reviewed in 2011 in the light of member’s increasing concerns with the terms on which government departments were issuing research contracts. The review (which, I should acknowledge, I chaired) explicitly ‘refines and strengthens the Association’s position on the rights of researchers in commissioned research contexts.’ (BERA 2011: Preamble) This is most clearly displayed in two paragraphs in the section of the guidelines on the publication of research (pars 40 and 41):

40. The right of researchers independently to publish the findings of their research under their own names is considered the norm for sponsored research, and this right should not be lightly waived or unreasonably denied. This right is linked to the obligation on researchers to ensure that their findings are placed in the public domain and within reasonable reach of educational practitioners and policy makers, parents, pupils and the wider public.

41. Researchers must avoid agreeing to any sponsor’s conditions that could lead to serious contravention of any aspect of these guidelines or that undermine the integrity of the research by imposing unjustifiable conditions on the methods to be used or the reporting of

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matter of science policy, governments gain most from investment in science when this is channelled to universities not on the basis of bureaucratic planning from outside the research community but on the basis of scientific merit assessed by, for example, research councils (Geiger 1985 and see Becher’s fifth category in the opening section of this paper).

outcomes. Attempts by sponsors or funding agencies to use any questionable influence should be reported to the Association. (BERA 2011)

... pious sentiments perhaps: I am not aware of any reported cases so far (apart from those that informed the review) and do any but the most powerful and prestigious universities really have the bargaining power to dictate the terms of their own research contracts?

Research journals, too, can contribute to the protection of the independence of research from funders' control. Radder describes how:

Since 2001 a number of prominent biomedical journals require that their authors make public any ties to external funding bodies and even demand them to sign a statement saying that, if such ties exist, the sponsors have not influenced the methods or contents of their research'. (Radder 2010: 14)

Though the processes that lead towards the commodification of research are global and powerful, there are forms of resistance available to us. There are small acts of defiance, such as those proposed by Norris and Pettigrew (above), but, perhaps more encouragingly a shift in the global climate in favour of open access research and publication and what Michael Peters describes as:

the development of knowledge cultures based on non-proprietary modes of knowledge production and exchange ...[and of] social processes and policies that foster openness as an overriding value as evidenced in the growth of open source, open access and open education and their convergences that characterise global knowledge communities that transcend borders of the nation state. (Peters 2013: 72–3)

(but will they be able to transcend the competing sovereignties of trans-national global capitalism?). Nor are the political implications of such open systems of knowledge production and dissemination lost on commentators. Peters, again:

openness seems also to suggest political transparency and the norms of open inquiry, indeed democracy itself as both the basis for the logic of inquiry and the dissemination of its results. (Peters 2013: 73).

How can a government that claims the high ground of democratic principles defend its imposition of terms for the conduct of research that require anything other than such openness?

Perhaps, like Roszak, we should take inspiration and direction from the *philosophes*:

For the *philosophe*, intellectuality began at the point where one undertook to make knowledge work. The intellectual was one who intervened in society for the defence of civilised values: free speech, free thought, free inquiry for the sake of reform. He was one who sought to clarify reality so that his fellow citizens could apply reason to the solution of their problems... It meant performing the service of criticising, clarifying, dissenting, resisting, deriding, exposing: in brief, educating in the fullest sense of the word as a member of 'the party of humanity'. (Roszak 1969: 32)

Not, I think, an account of our 'service' as intellectuals and researchers that sounds much like a commodity. '*Ecrasez l'infame!*'

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