London Review of Education
Vol. 8, No. 2, July 2010, 117–126

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Democracy, knowledge and critique: rethinking European universities beyond tradition and the market

Wim Weymans*

Columbia University, USA

In many European countries, universities are asked to become more market-oriented. Those who oppose this trend mostly invoke a traditional university ideal to make their case. This paper aims to look for a third way to conceptualise a university that is neither market-oriented nor traditionalist. It finds such an alternative by looking at a democratic culture in which knowledge remains indeterminate and subject to debate. It concretely demonstrates that this alternative view allows us to identify problematic aspects of contemporary discourses on universities, as exemplified by the European Commission's discourse. It ends by arguing that the alternative vision is more in tune with the grassroots reality of research and education than the market-oriented view.

Keywords: university; democracy; Europe; critique; market; knowledge

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that the European university's public role is currently being redefined in purely quantitative or formalistic terms such as output, excellence or quality. This redefinition is often described as a process whereby the university becomes more market-oriented or entrepreneurial in order to better serve the needs of the society that pays for it. A market-oriented university defines its public mission in quantitative terms, increases its autonomy in return for accountability, and more generally interprets its role and functioning in market-oriented terms (students becoming customers, etc). This redefinition of the university in terms of the market is often connected with wider trends or ideologies labelled as 'neoliberalism' or 'new public management'.

This new definition of an entrepreneurial university as a firm serving its stakeholders leaves many European academics and students increasingly dissatisfied. However, when asked what alternative they have in mind for the dominant market-oriented university, most academics only refer to the traditional university and its alleged autonomy vis-à-vis society. At the same time a recent Eurobarometer survey (2007) suggests that most academics are generally sympathetic to more cooperation between university and the market or society. This, then, suggests that academics do not really want to return to the traditional ivory tower, even when they use traditionalist language, probably because they have no other alternative language at their disposal. The fact that academics express their discontent with current reforms by referring to traditional ideals does not advance their cause. Market-oriented reformers can indeed easily refute their complaints by arguing that in our globalised post-national world turning back the clock is impossible, and that, as a result, there is no alternative but to reform universities by making them more adapted to new economic realities.

*Email: w.weymans.01@cantab.net

ISSN 1474-8460 print/ISSN 1474-8479 online

DOI: 10.1080/14748460.2010.487329
http://www.informaworld.com

This, then, is the problem: while many academics agree that the current market-oriented way to talk about universities is inadequate, it seems hard to imagine an alternative that is not simply a return to the traditional model from the past. This article hopes to solve this problem by developing an alternative vision of the university beyond 'the tradition' or 'the market'. In so doing, it will offer academics and policy-makers ideas and concepts that will allow them to criticise the current market-oriented reforms, without therefore returning to the traditional model of the past. I will argue that this alternative vision is no nostalgic or utopian fantasy, but instead deeply rooted in the ways our democratic societies operate. I will further argue that this alternative vision consequently corresponds better to the reality of teaching and research than the market-oriented model, which thus not only misunderstands democracy but also education and science itself.

Knowledge and critique in a democratic society

To understand this alternative and the assumptions on which it rests, we first need to focus on the existing ideal types or models and their underlying presuppositions. Although they look like opposites, I think that both the traditional view of the university and its market-oriented successor have more in common than one would believe at first sight. Consider the way both models define the public mission of universities, i.e., the transfer and generation of knowledge. In the traditional model it was assumed that knowledge was an end in itself and that universities served a nation and its culture or even humanity (Readings 1996; Barnett 2009, 106–8). Moreover, academics had the authority to determine what knowledge meant. The university was 'self-contained, governing itself, and focused on knowledge activities that it determines largely for itself' (Barnett 2009, 108). Academics embodied knowledge on behalf of society and were thus allowed to lock themselves up in their ivory towers. This traditional model was problematic, however. As Marquand explains, 'the academic profession became a secular priesthood, preoccupied by its own, increasingly arcane internal arguments, all too often developed in … inaccessible jargon and developed in obscure journals', and, as a result, 'the academy cut itself off from the living forces of the outside world' (Marquand 2004, 76; see also 138). Academics were thus often associated with 'arrogance, hermeticism and technocratic aloofness' (Marquand 2004, 138).

This explains why the traditional model came under pressure. Although different universities in different countries all had specific histories of their own, I still think that it is fair to say that during the late 1960s and early 1970s this traditional vision of the university generally came under attack. For demographic, cultural and economic reasons, western universities were called upon to be more open to society and the market. To simplify the picture rather drastically, from the 1980s onwards the ivory tower was slowly replaced by the market, which meant that 'condescending bureaucrats and haughty professionals' were now 'exposed to competitive pressures, simulating those of the marketplace' (Marquand 2004, 93). This introduction of 'managerialist ideologies' into 'the public sector' meant that 'trust in professional self regulation was felt to be misplaced' and that 'all forms of resources must be managed with maximum efficiency and accountability and harnessed to the needs of society' (Henkel 1999, 107). From now on, society – the state or the private sector – would only pay for research if universities could justify it. This is why 'it is no longer sufficient to produce knowledge; now that newly produced knowledge has to be put to work to effect some kind of return' and knowledge also 'has to satisfy external clients' (Barnett 2009, 105, 109). Moreover, the universities' public mission was now redefined in empty quantitative terms such as 'quality', 'performance' or 'excellence' that were borrowed from the market and replaced content-related terms such as a national culture, which had come under pressure in a globalised world. As a result, even the humanities 'now have to become

accountable to the test of use value, itself construed mainly in terms of money or income generation' (Barnett 2009, 109).

Even if this sketch may seem rather schematic and broad, it serves a purpose, as it helps us explain why the traditional model and its market-oriented successor share the same assumption, namely that the universities' public mission – the transfer and generation of knowledge – should be objectified or fixed, be it by the ivory tower professor who pretended to embody knowledge or by the bureaucratic accountants who reduce knowledge to something that can be measured.

Alternatively, one can see the knowledge transferred and produced by universities as indeterminate, thus resisting any final definition or control. Such definition of knowledge can be found in a specific strand of democratic theory, developed by European thinkers such as Claude Lefort or more recently Bruno Latour. It is indeed important to recognise the linkage between this alternative definition of knowledge and the democratic societies in which we live. Following Lefort, I define democracy in a Tocquevillian sense, that is to say not in the strict institutional or political meaning of the word but instead in a broader sociological sense that also comprises values, practices and a 'way of life' of a society (see Lefort 1988, 2–3).

In the wake of Tocqueville, we can observe that in democratic societies public goods – such as the common good, culture, knowledge, the will of the people, justice or equality – have become indeterminate points of reference: we constantly refer to them but at the same time no-one can pretend that he or she knows their ultimate meaning, which is why they remain necessarily subject to debate and contestation. As Marquand explains: 'the public interest is not a fixed essence… it is inherently contestable, both in the sense that agreement on it can never be final, and in the sense that it is normally defined through conflict' (Marquand 2004, 33). We are thus confronted with 'contestability' as a form of 'new universality' (Barnett 2005, 794). For Lefort, this contestation not only affects politics, but also society in general, in which 'a process of questioning is implicit in social practice' and in which 'no one has the answer to the questions that arise' (Lefort 1988, 19).

One can argue that the uncertainty and conflict that are typical for democratic societies also affect the nature of knowledge as a public good, as represented by universities. If anything, universities' public mission consists in generating and transferring knowledge. In the light of this alternative definition of knowledge as inherently indeterminate and open-ended, any reduction of knowledge and knowledge production to either the sovereign will of ivory tower academics or else to quantitative output measured by 'accountants' can then be regarded as inappropriate in a democratic society that embraces uncertainty and, therefore, conflict.

The same applies to the process of learning in those universities. It can indeed be argued that learning is 'an uncertain process of exploration, deconstruction, refashioning and interrogation' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 196). As a student of Lefort explains: 'this is the ultimate reason why learning is so difficult. In searching for knowledge, we have to confront a situation which tells us that we can never know' (Gauchet 2002, 12). Given this uncertainty, it follows that '"quality" is not measurable, because what is valuable to one learner might be experienced as oppressive to another' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 196). If 'a school must introduce its students to knowledge, the acquisition of which is not the same as buying a commodity', an institution such as a university 'doesn't have clients' (Verschaffel 2009, 145).

We are now in a position to see why this alternative view of knowledge and the university differs from both the traditional and the market-oriented view. Unlike the traditional model, the alternative model assumes that the universities' role is no longer to embody the knowledge of a nation or even humanity. Like the market-oriented model, it accepts that knowledge has become a vital part in our economies and that its social role is now redefined accordingly. But unlike this dominant market-oriented alternative, the alternative model assumes that it is equally wrong to reduce the universities' knowledge to quantifiable output. The problem with the

market-oriented model, then, is not so much that it asks universities to be accountable and serve society, but that in so doing, it assumes that a public good such as knowledge should be clearly defined, grasped or measured.

Given the current temptation to objectify, simplify or quantify knowledge and other public goods, democratic societies need specific institutions or spaces where they can protect themselves from these temptations so that debate can be preserved. Just as in politics, the common good is represented and debated in parliaments, so in science knowledge is debated and transferred in universities, lecture theatres, laboratories, and conference rooms. In both spheres the common good or knowledge are shielded from the illusion that they can be immediately grasped or appropriated. As Latour writes: 'transparency and immediacy are bad for science as well as for politics; they would make both suffocate' (Latour 2005, 21). An alternative view thus implies 'a good grasp of the masses of intermediaries necessary to represent anything' and 'a new respect for mediators' (Latour 2005, 29). This means that institutions that represent knowledge currently play a more important role than hitherto assumed.

It is important to see that universities, where people gather to look for knowledge, have specific rules and practices that are no longer meant to 'discipline' people (as Foucault and his followers argued), but rather to prevent anyone from appropriating knowledge, as this would mean the end of debate, conflict and the search for truth. As Verschaffel explains:

> … the building represents the specificity of the field and effectively circumscribes the space that is ruled by the logic of that field. These spaces are public spaces: anyone can enter them – but only on the condition that they are willing to speak the language of that institution. … The architecture therefore creates a threshold… it indicates the boundaries of an area of relative autonomy. (Verschaffel 2009, 143)

This is why these spaces are 'semi-public' or 'separate spaces' (Verschaffel 2009, 142).

To have universities that are open to society and serve its aims, they must paradoxically be partly shielded from social pressure to yield instant results, which is why institutional 'walls' or 'thresholds' are required. So even in a modern, knowledge-based economy the 'walls' of the 'ivory tower' matter, although their role has now changed. These walls should no longer, as one traditionally believed, protect the privileges of all-knowing academics against calls for accountability, but should rather protect universities and the people working there against immediate needs and calls for results from society (or even from academics). After all, 'the administration of knowledge differs from commercial management' and 'acquiring insight differs from making profit' (Verschaffel 2009, 144). In so doing, these walls preserve knowledge's indeterminate nature against pressures from both in and outside.

Paradoxically, these 'walls' and 'thresholds' also protect (rather than restrict) the possibility of internal debate and critique. Conversely, an 'institutional critique that aims at the existence of the institution itself', such as the market-oriented criticism of institutions and its 'walls' or 'thresholds', 'undermines the possibility of criticism' inside these institutions (Verschaffel 2009, 144). I believe that it is indeed correct to say that:

> … the trend to counter the slowness and bureaucracy of every institution by management – e.g., rethinking the concept of… the university as a company or as business – is extremely dangerous and even perverse. The autonomy of the field is eroded and the margin of freedom and criticism quickly shrinks away. (Verschaffel 2009, 144)

According to the alternative view, achieving a 'knowledge-based economy' requires us, paradoxically, to resist the temptation to objectify, fix or control the production and transfer of knowledge. Rather than trying to control or steer the production of innovative knowledge, this alternative view argues that to have creative scientists and to educate creative individuals one should partly shield both scientists and students from immediate social pressures. In order to

have useful applications or employable students one not only needs to expose universities to society, but also to partly shield them from society and the market and their desire for determinate targets and results. Researchers and students can only become useful when they also focus on 'fundamental' issues without immediate applicability or employability. Of course, it is true that universities are de facto serving the market and society: universities employ people, prepare students for the labor market and are often even involved in commercial projects. However, it is characteristic and even necessary for universities (or even private research laboratories) that these commercial or labor-market interests are seen as secondary to the primary aim of gaining and transferring knowledge. While it may be good to bear in mind that education and research should, in the end, be useful for society, its use will remain often an indirect result of an environment which allows students and researchers alike to be free from immediate social needs (as expressed in transferable skills or competences or output and patents). This, then, also presupposes that society should partly trust universities not only to have diverse 'targets' but sometimes to have no targets at all. It may seem contradictory that in order to serve society we need institutions that resist society's immediate demands, but according to the alternative view I just proposed this may well be the only way to have truly 'excellent' research and education.

The European Commission discourse and its problems

To understand the implications of this alternative approach and to explain its meaning more concretely, I will now use it to offer a critical analysis of the current-market oriented view. To do that, I take the example of the influential discourse on European universities, as it can be found in documents related to the Bologna process and in European Commission documents which I will refer to with the acronym CEC (which stands for 'Commission of the European Communities'). I choose this discourse because of its implications on a national level and because it presents itself as a new framework for universities beyond the traditional nation-state (for a more general analysis of the European Commission's ideas on higher education see Weymans 2009). When we examine the general aims that are defended by the Commission, it is clear that it starts from a market-oriented vision of universities. The Commission first of all wants to break with the traditional deficient model of the (state-dependent) university (CEC 2003, 5–6; CEC 2005, 3–4; CEC 2006, 3). The production and transfer of knowledge are no longer seen in the context of a national culture and citizenship, but rather against the background of the so-called Lisbon strategy that wants to turn Europe into 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (CEC 2003, 2). This in turn requires more innovative researchers and the 'education and training' of creative individuals who are 'employable'.

According to the intergovernmental Bologna declaration and its ensuing Bologna process steered by the Commission, universities should 'continuously adapt to changing needs' and 'society's demands', by producing degrees that are 'relevant to the European labour market' (The European Ministers of Education 1999), because 'too many graduates… lack the kind of entrepreneurship and skills sought on the labour market' (CEC 2005, 4). In the field of research, too, universities are asked to support a knowledge society that 'depends for its growth on the production of new knowledge' and 'its transmission through education and training', which is why 'Europe needs excellence in its universities' (CEC 2003, 2; the term excellence is used abundantly elsewhere, e.g., CEC 2003, 18–9; CEC 2005, 5; CEC 2006, 9). To this end, governments should allow them more autonomy, which would be compensated by increased accountability to ensure that public or private money is well-spent, thus 'moving from state control to accountability to society' (CEC 2005, 9; CEC 2003, 9; CEC 2006, 5; CEC 2005, 7–8; see also CEC 2003, 14).

Given that a return to the old traditional university seems impossible, and that most analysts agree that European universities need to reform, this European discourse seems reasonable. Moreover, it is hard to disagree with these general and abstract goals (see Readings 1996, 22–3, 35, 39 and so on). Who does not want innovative and excellent research and creative autonomous 'employable' individuals? How can one object to universities serving society's needs?

As I have just argued, in our democratic societies public goods such as culture, knowledge or the common good should indeed remain elusive and transcendent. Yet, in the light of the theory of democracy I outlined earlier, the problem starts once knowledge and excellence are reduced to quantifiable 'targets' or output. It is one thing to say that scientific quality remains formal, not reduced to any content, but quite another to formalise and measure its output. Or to use Readings' terminology, there is an important difference between 'accountability' and 'accounting': to ask scientists to be accountable is not the same thing as counting their results (Readings 1996, 18, 26, 131, 164). When we look again at the European discourse, we find that it indeed constantly oscillates between an indeterminate or 'broad' definition of knowledge and service to society, and a more 'narrow' vision. This may explain some of the tensions in this discourse.

On the one hand, the Commission suggests that universities should be more open to society and should 'explain at home and abroad the specific value of what they produce for learners and society' (CEC 2005, 4). But on the other hand, the Commission also states that 'universities should be… focusing funding on relevant outputs' and calls for 'more competition-based funding in research and more output-related funding in education' (CEC 2006, 7; CEC 2005, 8. See also CEC 2005, 10). Yet the more output is measured in the social sciences, the more social scientists tend to publish in highly specialised journals, which means that they will be less likely to publish for a wider audience (as this is not acknowledged as relevant 'output' in most rankings). Similarly, the Commission wants to 'reinforce the societal roles of universities' and their 'public mission' in the broad sense but then, at the same time, redefines their role in a narrow economic market-oriented way (CEC 2006, 2, 6). It is one thing to say that university education should be responsive to 'industry's need for well trained graduates and researchers' (CEC 2005, 9) and quite another to state that 'the integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, is a major social responsibility of higher education' (CEC 2005, 5) or that 'university programmes should be structured to enhance directly the employability of graduates' (CEC 2006, 6).

Also, the Commissions' vision of research is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Commission argues that fundamental research is crucial and that Europe (unlike the US) focuses too much on applied research (CEC 2003, 8), but on the other hand, even under the so-called seventh framework funding program, a large part of the research budget goes to so-called collaborative research whereby the Commission and not the researchers determines the research agenda.

Accountability too is defined in an ambiguous way. While the Commissions' plea for more accountability could in principle allow for a plurality of forms of accountability, the Commission at the same time reduces accountability to 'external quality assurance' (CEC 2005, 7), relates it to 'clearly defined targets and indicators' (CEC 2006, 8) or to the presence of professional management in universities allowing 'professionals from outside the purely academic tradition' within 'universities' management and governance structures' (CEC 2003, 17, 9. See also CEC 2005, 9; CEC 2006, 5; Marquand 2004, 111). In so doing, the Commission risks reducing 'accountability' to 'accounting', by substituting 'accountability through markets or proxy markets' and privileging 'quantitative measurement over qualitative judgement' (Marquand 2004, 94, 111). Or, as O'Neill rightly complains, 'the real focus is on performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure quality of performance accurately' (O'Neill 2002, 54).

By trying to realise inherently open-ended policy targets, such as 'innovation' or 'excellence' through mechanisms of control, these aims are narrowed down, which eventually risks endangering universities rather than protecting or strengthening them. The alternative view I just sketched allows us to understand why defining knowledge as something that should merely be counted and made useful, is misguided and ultimately undermines the very logic of democratic societies and the role knowledge plays in them.

Accountability and the reality of education and research

So far we have argued that this alternative view, beyond tradition and the market, allows us to identify problems and ambiguities in the market-oriented discourse. Of course, the only way to find out if this conceptual alternative is better than the dominant market-oriented view is by looking not just at democratic societies in general, but also at actual research and education. Are there, then, any concrete indications that, when it comes to respecting and fostering education and research (and thus society in general), the dominant market-oriented practices may be less beneficial than the alternative model?

A major result of the market-oriented discourse and policy has been an increased call for accountability at the grassroots of research and education. Yet, one can generally wonder if the reduction of accountability to accounting did not do more harm than good to actual scientific practice and teaching. In the past:

> … a certain kind of funding helped to reap the fruits of novel ideas: funding based on trust that scientists do their work as well as they can. However, for many years, scientific research activity has been confronted with a high level of distrust, and this distrust is visible in the widespread use of performance indicators and by growth in measures such as evaluation, progress reports, management reports, audit certificates and the like. (Heinze et al. 2009, 621)

Onora O'Neill states that 'the new accountability is widely experienced not just as *changing* but… as *distorting the proper aims of professional practice* and indeed as damaging professional pride and integrity' (O'Neill 2002, 50; emphasis in the original). Marquand makes a similar observation when he writes that:

> … academic research was audited by a costly and bureaucratic appraisal system of ever-increasing complexity, whose judgements carried substantial financial rewards and penalties with them, and led to a marked increase in the quantity of academic publications, accompanied, many academics believed, by a decline in their quality. (Marquand 2004, 112)

Indeed, as Burke and Jackson explain, 'quality assurance… appears to be functioning more as a form of regulation over teachers and learners than it does to be enhancing quality within educational institutions' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 197).

This narrow view of accountability implies that 'academics can no longer teach or do research in the way their professional judgement dictates. They have to keep one eye (sometimes both eyes) on time-consuming assessment procedures imposed by government-appointed funding councils' (Marquand 2004, 127). As a result, 'academics no longer engage in intellectual activities for the sake of contributing to ideas and meaning but are judged largely on the number of outputs and the nature of the publication itself' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 197).

In the case of education, too, it can be argued that 'the current regimes are repressing creativity in learning' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 188). Indeed, 'quality assurance has led to a "tick-box" culture in which learning is reduced to sets of pre-determined bullet points' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 188). However, 'such approaches can tell us nothing about the complex experiences of learning' that involve 'complex and emotional processes' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 196–7). Market-oriented mechanisms and their 'incentives' may be counter-productive for teachers in particular. As Marquand explains: 'academics do not miraculously become more

efficient when the staff-student ratio falls and lectures are overcrowded' (Marquand 2004, 29). Moreover, 'the introduction of performance-related pay and corporate-sector assessment procedures into the universities… may lead academics to distort their research priorities or to dilute the intellectual quality of their courses' (Marquand 2004, 35–6).

Not only could one argue that this reductionist, 'narrow' view of accountability became counterproductive, but also that it suffered from the same weaknesses as the system it wanted to fight. Indeed, we can observe that the distrust vis-à-vis the traditional ivory tower professor, who could abuse his power or the taxpayer's money, has paradoxically created a new group of experts who determine what counts as valid output (see also Readings 1996, 32–3; O'Neill 2002, 52–3). Elitist academics are now de facto replaced by new invisible bureaucrats who are involved in quality assurance processes and who themselves seem to be unaccountable. One can indeed say that, 'although the quality movement might have torn down some of the certainties of those in privileged institutional positions, new mechanisms of unequal power relations are in operation' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 192). To put this another way: 'the battery of tests, questionnaires and interviewing manuals… dissimulate the image of those in power by generating the illusion of an impersonal norm' (Lefort 1986, 232). It suffices, however, to ask questions such as: 'by whom were they to be appointed? Who would lay down the rules which they would have to follow?' (Marquand 2004, 98) to see that instead of full transparency and accountability we often get even more uncertainty or arbitrariness.

According to the alternative view, guaranteeing the universities' contribution to society means resisting the temptation to control science and thus give back the freedom which is typical of fundamental research. The European Commission admits that 'the pursuit of knowledge essentially for its own sake… remains a major area for university research activity', which explains why American research universities focusing on such fundamental research are so successful and why European universities' focus on 'directly applied research for the business sector… could endanger their capacity to contribute to the progress of knowledge' (CEC 2003, 8). Indeed, in successful innovative research, 'core institutional funds, which are independent from success in attracting external grant money from research councils, have been found highly important to supporting scientific accomplishments' (Heinze et al. 2009, 618). Yet today:

> … many funding agencies require research proposals to set targets, or give exact details of the likely results, but this is often not possible with exploratory, open-ended research, characterized by one group leader as 'a meandering path, you're branching out, making new things all the time and closing up other things and so you're moving through a difficult landscape to find your way to interesting things'. (Heinze et al. 2009, 619)

Or to quote the famous physicist Richard Feynman on his approach to research: 'there was no importance to what I was doing, but ultimately there was' (Feynman 1997, 174). This is why 'the art of knowing has remained unspecifiable at the very heart of science' (Polanyi 1974, 55). Moreover, in our contemporary complex world, 'forms of knowledge abound and any simple classification is bound to be in error' (Barnett 2009, 116). It comes as no surprise that 'creative scientists tend to move to research units that offer an opportunity to change field or to address intrinsically risky research problems. Fundamental research labs of large, leading industrial companies were a magnet for such scientists, at least until the early 1990s' (Heinze et al. 2009, 618). Likewise, teaching should, at least in part, be shielded from immediate market pressures. That way, it can be preserved as 'a flexible space in which the unexpected, exciting, imaginative, creative, uncertain and iterative processes of learning are embraced and made possible' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 185).

This is not to say that according to the alternative view, science, research or education should no longer be called to account. Rather, it means the 'refusal to believe that the question of quality of education is susceptible to statistical calculation' (Readings 1996, 131). To maintain

high standards, governments should not formalise and control scientific output, but they must instead allow for judgment and real accountability that is less precise but more effective than mere accounting. As Readings points out, accountability is about taking 'responsibility for the judgment delivered, rather than hiding behind a statistical pretension to objectivity' (Readings 1996, 132). It follows that in democratic societies, research policy cannot merely be based on objectified standards but also implies conflict. As a result, 'accountability can come only through… argument, discussion, debate and democratic engagement' (Marquand 2004, 61). In such an alternative view, learning processes 'will not straightforwardly be experienced as simply "excellent" or "poor" because learning will usually involve moments of discomfort and uncertainty, even pain, as taken-for-granted assumptions get challenged, questioned and contested' (Burke and Jackson 2007, 196). Alternative practices that are more in tune with democratic societies, which embrace uncertainty, could involve not only more trust and a base level of funding, but also, for example, 'more specific and more local forms of accountability, based on open-ended dialogue between professionals and their stakeholders' (Marquand 2004, 142; see also O'Neill 2002, 58–9).

To conclude, I hope to have shown that there exists an alternative way to think about universities, one that does not imply a return to the past or tradition. I believe that this alternative view of knowledge is much more in tune with the open-ended nature of democratic societies than the market-oriented view that denies its indeterminacy. Moreover, it also comes much closer to what successful research and education is all about and, in that way, also offers a more effective alternative to the often counter-productive predominant market-oriented European discourse.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the fourth international 'Euredocs' conference in London in May 2007.

Notes on contributor

Wim Weymans is currently a visiting scholar at Columbia University, where he also was an Adjunct Assistant Professor from 2008 to 2009. He holds degrees in history (MA), philosophy (PhD) and political theory (MPhil) from the universities of Cambridge and Leuven, Belgium. He is chiefly interested in French social, historical and political thought post-1968. He has also written on the problem of the crisis of political representation, on political freedom and the European research area.

References

Barnett, R. 2005. Recapturing the universal in the university. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 37, no 6: 785–97.

Barnett, R. 2009. Knowledge interests and knowledge policies. Rethinking the university in the twenty-first century. In *Rethinking the university after Bologna. New concepts and practices beyond tradition and the market,* 103–19. Antwerp: UCSIA.

Burke, P.J., and S. Jackson. 2007. *Reconceptualising lifelong learning. Feminist interventions.* London: Routledge.

Eurobarometer. 2007. *Perceptions of higher education reforms.* March, No. 192.

The European Ministers of Education. 1999. *The Bologna declaration of 19 June 1999.*

CEC. 2003. *The role of universities in the Europe of knowledge.* COM (2003) 58 final.

CEC. 2005. *Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: Enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy.* COM (2005) 152 final.

CEC. 2006. *Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: Education, research and innovation.* COM (2006) 208 final.

Feynman, R.P. 1997. *'Surely you're joking, Mr. Feynman!' Adventures of a curious character.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Gauchet, M. 2002. Redefining the unconscious. *Thesis Eleven* 71, November: 4–23.
Heinze, T., P. Shapira, J. Rogers, and J.M. Senker. 2009. Organizational and institutional influences on creativity in scientific research. *Research Policy* 38: 610–23.
Henkel, M. 1999. The modernisation of research evaluation: The case of the UK. *Higher Education* 38, no. 1: 105–22.
Latour, B. 2005. From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or how to make things public. In *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy,* ed. B Latour and P. Weibel, 14–41. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Lefort, C. 1986. *The political forms of modern society. Bureaucracy, democracy, totalitarianism.* Cambridge: Polity.
Lefort, C. 1988. *Democracy and political theory.* Cambridge: Polity.
Lefort, C. 1992. Formation et autorité: L'éducation humaniste. In *Ecrire. A l'épreuve du politique,* 209–26. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
Marquand, D. 2004. *Decline of the public. The hollowing-out of citizenship.* Cambridge: Polity.
O'Neill, O. 2002. *A question of trust.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Polanyi, M. 1974. *Personal knowledge. Towards a post-critical philosophy.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Readings, B. 1996. *The university in ruins.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Verschaffel, B. 2009. Semi-public spaces: The spatial logic of institutions. In *Does truth matter?,* ed. R. Geenens, and R. Tinnevelt, 133–46. Dordrecht: Springer.
Weymans, W. 2009. From coherence to differentiation: Understanding (changes in) the European area for higher education and research. In *International handbook of comparative education,* ed. R. Cowen, and A. Kazamias, 561–77. Dordrecht: Springer.