‘Governance, Reflexivity and Critique: Places of Possibility in Spaces of Expectation’

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Overview

The contexts and cultures of knowledge production work to inform and impede a practice aimed at positive transformations in socio-economic conditions (May with Perry 2011). Yet in discussions of reflexivity and critique these can be neglected through a focus upon cultures separate from institutional contexts (Knorr Cetina 1999). At the same time we are seeing shifts in the political economy of knowledge relating to the justification, production and application of knowledge across disciplines and institutional settings (Nowotny et al 2001). This paper charts a journey that starts with an account of contemporary urban changes.

It then moves on to examine their implications for the role and place of social research as critique drawing upon experiences of conducting research with and for, urban policy-makers and university managers over a twelve year period. Its overall purpose is to find how: “The project of governing societies, and its political character, cannot be blotted out by the ‘withering sun of globalization’ or fade to grey in the drab world of governance” (Dean 2007: 14). These are the spaces in which more reflexive, engaged and confident practices can emerge in the search for clarification, illumination, critique and positive transformation.
**Introduction**

The contexts and cultures of knowledge production work to create and prevent a practice aimed at positive transformations in socio-economic conditions (May with Perry 2011). Yet in discussions of reflexivity and critique these can be neglected through a focus upon cultures separate from institutional contexts (Knorr Cetina 1999), as well as institutions separate from environmental conditions (May and Perry 2006).

We are witnessing profound shifts in the political economy of knowledge relating to the justification, production and application of knowledge across disciplines and institutional settings (Nowotny et al 2001). Whilst processes of contestation and negotiation inform the development of urban policies (Cochrane 2007), the intensification of neo-liberal ideology is ‘creating’ market opportunities in universities through the conception and development of particular policies (McGettigan 2013) and through the exclusion of alternative approaches (Mullard 2011).

This paper starts with existing accounts of these changing contexts. It then moves on to consider the place of research as critique aimed at positive transformation, which draws upon experiences of conducting urban research with and for, urban policy-makers and university managers over a ten year period. Through an examination of contexts, processes and experiences, the potential for changes in narrowly formulated practices can then be opened up to possibility.

**Drivers in Urban Development**

One key trend is apparent in urban development: the reshaping of contexts in the name of competitiveness (Cochrane 2013). This includes particular ideas of ‘attractiveness’ of locality in order to obtain investment from mobile capital. Such practices have had clear consequences for the form and content of urban development. ‘International competitiveness’ is a central plank of policies with indices of international comparison between cities a driving force for measuring success by city politicians and officials. As this occurs, so do the ‘distances’ between cities that are the subject of comparison: for example, in the U.K., the challenges are not seen to come
from mainland Europe or solely the USA, but India and China, along with the ‘BRIC’ economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China).

For developed countries, concerns about competition from developing economies heightened a frenetic search for solutions to issues of growth. The discourse of the ‘knowledge economy’ began to be consolidated, drawing on work from the 1970s and subsequent analyses of the implications for competitiveness of a post-Fordist, post-industrial economy. As global capital has little affiliation in its insatiable search for profit, so manufacturing began to move to developing countries, leading to questions over new forms of production and consumption. Deregulation and a lessening of control of markets within nation-state boundaries led to a separation of industrial capital and the circulation of private, money-capital with a resulting deterritorialization (Lash and Urry 1987; Harvey 2006).

Transformations challenged political boundaries in the name of particular ideas of the ‘economic’ as part of a logic supra-nationalisation where the flow of capital, goods, people and images intensifies (Castells 2009). Accompanying this is a clear tendency towards the devolution of responsibilities from national to sub-national levels (Brenner 2004), a growing recognition of the importance of cities to regional and national economies (Sassen 2011) and the intensification of cities as the sites of responses to those forces, including from climate change (Koch 2012).

The role of the state has been transformed to that of promoting and funding market solutions and placing greater responsibility upon the individual, whilst also managing “uneven spatio-temporal development generated by the capital relation” (Jessop 2008: 196). Economic implications are apparent in the global dominance of transnational corporations, global finance, flexible production and assembly and the rise of information and service economies (Smart 2003). Political changes can be seen in the role of international organizations, degrees of sub-national regional autonomy and the spread of post-welfare public policies and global social movements (Ritzer 2004), whilst cultural alterations have arisen in consumption patterns, tourism, media and information flows (Franklin 2010).
For the purposes of this argument, the fundamental characteristic of neo-liberal globalization is not to take context seriously. It does not ‘see’ place for that would be to take an understanding of the realities of context and history as important matters. It is context-revising and seeks to permanently supplant existing conditions in the name of imagined futures. If context becomes an issue it is admissible as an individualism that supplants a relational understanding with the pursuit of individual preferences furnished by markets. The only admissible context is the individual and their choices.

Such an approach has been widely criticized for its empirical and theoretical inadequacy (Bourdieu 1992; Massey 2005). It has blurred boundaries, set up for good reasons in recognition of the limits of markets, between government and business “within the former territory reserved to government” (Crouch 2004: 109). The overall result is a “reign of abstraction” of the subject (Žižek 2009: 142) achieved through a set of politically and economically enacted practices that dissolve democracy: “Wealth aims at endless growth, but it does not have the power to transcend itself” (Rancière 2006: 49).

In the face of these pressures civil servants can become what, in contemporary consultancy parlance is termed ‘non-directive facilitators’, of market logics. Their remit, for their political masters, is to provide opportunities in spaces that were previously reserved for public provision. Here we find practices of naturalization accorded to the economy as if that interacted in the absence of cultural and social conditions, including public policy (Hirst and Thompson 1999; Hirst 2005). That undermines claims to impartiality as it is set against the presumption that public services can and must learn from private practices.

These pressures enable an acontextual dynamic in the formulation of government policy and also inform how cities are viewed according to their predispositions to live up to the promise of the market. At the same time that enables a policy to be enacted according to the prioritization of particular places that are assumed to posses that which ‘others’ do not (May and Marvin 2003). London and the South East thereby become the epitome of a relational idea of space that is informed by particular ideas of economic growth and attraction. In these circumstances an elected Mayor, with regulatory and distributive powers, becomes important in the governing of
a global centre of finance capital, set against a democratic deficit that is evident in other English regions (Sandford 2009).

Another way of not tackling these issues head on - the privileging of particular places against the invisibility of other spaces - is to see former as emblematic which function as aspirations for others to embrace. An absence of embrace by city leaders of the potential that is offered in neoliberal aspirations signals a failure to live up to the permanent promise of possibility. Whilst contexts differ and the needs of populations vary, to admit of the importance of context is not to stand up to the aspirational challenge in the first place. The ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ that resides in leaders can overcome all impediments!

Aspirations for continued growth without sensitivity to context, let alone consequence, are permitted uninterrupted path through this politics of restriction, aspiration and ultimately, capitulation. Attempts to politicize issues are met with different responses from the centre. Typically these can take the form of not being innovative enough to take forward that which others are represented as being able to do – without any sense of the differential capacities which exist for this purpose. That leads to a Whitehall view that cities are characterized by ‘second-rate thinking’, as well as the desire for ‘second city’ status outside London.

Jane Jacobs characterized the governance of cities as ‘crazy quilts’ (1993: 540) and they face extraordinary challenges as in the case of Los Angeles at the turn of the twenty-first century:

Increasing income inequalities and social polarization, massive legal and illegal immigration, the magnification of cultural diversity and inter-cultural tensions, the squeeze on middle-class households, increasing homelessness, and the rising urban densities in both Inner and Outer Cities created a much more volatile ‘new’ Los Angeles (Soja 2000: 144).

In the face of these there must first be some common understanding of what those challenges are and the best means of organizing and financing the solutions. Of course, challenges and solutions are subject to political contestation, but in the current climate the range of options is severely restricted.
Unpalatable truths are not met in some rational, warm embrace. They are often met with indifference and denial, particular when it is seen as politic to market a city on the basis of its attraction to ‘creative’ elites who might be tempted to take their talents elsewhere. So cities become: “a nexus where many of the new organizational tendencies of economies and societies come together in specific localized configurations” (Sassen 2006: 180).

Knowledge-based wealth creation is a response, in the face of the flight of manufacturing to ever cheaper destinations. Its characteristics involve building economies of scale and a critical mass of expertise within particular localities (Porter 1998). An emphasis then arises upon a group or class with particular characteristics - perhaps even rooted in common attributes. Thus we have the creative class: “the fundamental source of economic growth and that it is an essential part of everyone’s humanity that needs to be cultivated” (Florida 2002: 317).

As we layer the knowledge economy onto neoliberal globalization, does it represent something new? Some recognise that knowledge has always played an important economic role, but that it is the application of knowledge to the production of knowledge that is new (Castells 2009). In this respect, the move from industrialism to ‘informationalism’ heralds a new mode of production in which ‘knowledge capitalism’ characterises the contemporary economic, social and institutional world (Jessop 2002; Gibbons et al 1994). Others argue that the primary importance of knowledge as the resource, rather than a resource, has led to a post-capitalist society, which fundamentally changes the structure of society, the economy and the political world (Drucker 2007).

As the boundaries between government and business become more blurred, so do those between knowledge, economy and society. What city does not wish to become a ‘knowledge city’? It is an attractor to place associated with the desire for growth that is bolstered by the idea of globalization. A naturalized ideology, driven by the idea of economic necessity, accompanies an agential component of ‘choice’ signified in terms of appropriate aspirations to become something ‘other’ and so transcend actually existing conditions – the absence of which
implies that a city is not a serious contender on the global, competitive stage. Legitimate processes of knowledge generation now require ‘tool-kits’, ‘models’ or ‘products’ as their outputs. In the management or resolution of social issues this implies that the criteria of ‘relevance’ and ‘usefulness’ assumes an increased importance in defining not only what knowledge should be produced but how it should be judged (May 2001). Research driven by curiosity becomes more of a luxury in the face of these necessities, leading to a greater emphasis on industrial needs and knowledge application for economic gain (Quiddington 2010).

Whilst other sites of knowledge production exist (R and D divisions in large companies, voluntary sector and consultancies etc.), the single most important site of knowledge production is the university. That is not to ignore those other sites, but to recognize the status that the academy enjoys as the foremost acknowledged source of legitimate, objective, excellence-driven knowledge. The structures, norms and processes of these institutions must therefore be assumed to be distinctive in orientation unless, of course, it is argued that it is solely the exceptionality of the rational individual, separate from their context, that provides for excellence! These are institutional spaces that provide a context in which external pressures and expectations are met, managed, mitigated or amplified (May with Perry 2011).

Universities have a long history of industrial links (Newfield 2003). Yet in the context of changing environmental pressures we see a greater emphasis now being placed on economic purpose and less institutional separation between the production, distribution and deployment of knowledge (May and Perry Forthcoming). The implications for universities of the changing international political economy of knowledge have been variously understood, from those who chart the recasting of university roles and functions and subsequent internal reorientations (Menand 2010) to the replacement of collegiality by corporatism (McGettigan 2013). League tables of global university success now parallel those of global city hierarchies, with each feeding off the other with consequences for urban research (Allen and Imrie 2010).

Knowledge is viewed within the university as a panacea to specific economic problems, with a strong instrumental and strategic role. It is a tool to produce competitive advantage. It can be harnessed, codified, managed and stored with the potential for translation into direct economic advantage being paramount. The ability to measure, define and demonstrate success in
knowledge hierarchies through metrics and league tables of innovative output in the struggle for symbolic advantage between and within universities is all around us. Science is not simply a practice produced in the service of interest-free illumination, but it is implicated in the reproduction of the economy.

We then witness a similar process to the one charted in urban practices: a frenetic search for the ‘unattainable in the name of the intangible’ (May and Perry 2006). As cities want the multinational names on building to demonstrate their success, so do university strategies declare they ‘need’ a Nobel Prize winner to be recruited by a particular date, or ‘stellar’ academics (we are now beyond the global!) should be attracted to their institutions. Cities want global universities and universities want global cities. To question this process is to constitute oneself as one who does not understand the self-evidence of reality.

Another element to these changes appears less instrumentally driven: a concern with the changing role of knowledge, evidence and expertise in policy-making itself (Turner 2003; Wagenaar 2011). This has led to greater integration of ‘experts’ into governance systems across a range of policy-fields. Whilst often consultants employed in the private sector, the development of knowledge cities also sees many academics becoming part of the policy and evidence-based producing machine with the accompanying potential to de-politicize and turn decision-making into a technocratic exercise. As David Harvey observes of the dynamics of Wall Street, the captive opinion in the think tanks and universities that are controlled by their money and influence speak of issues that do not matter and find solution to non-existent questions: “One minute they talk of nothing other than the austerity necessary for everyone to cure the deficit, and the next they are proposing to reduce their own taxation no matter what impact this may have on the deficit” (2012: 161).

There are examples of economists treating whole countries as grounds for the experimentation of their ideological predispositions, whilst ideas concerning the economic value of science parks, as well as creative classes, emanate from the world of academia and find their way into aspirations to become ‘science cities’ (May and Perry 2011a). The recruitment and deployment of consultants and expert opinion works through disavowal among the powerful: they are relieved of their responsibilities through the creation of a distance from the findings of others. A
gap between power and accountability enables an understanding of how these practices enjoy an extensive reach within organizations and the policy process despite the incredulity with which they are often greeted by employees and front-line officials. Another parallel with the urban policy process is thereby revealed: “In creating social distances which divorce control from accountability, consulting reveals a fundamental shifting of bureaucratic ground, a reformatting of inequality, increasing social distance. Power can become concentrated at the top, but authority does not thereby increase” (Sennett 2006: 57).

Across disciplines, university-based research and commentary is both critical of these developments and complicit in their reproduction through a dynamic conservatism aimed at the preservation of the status quo and justified according to encroachments upon quality. In the face of increasing commercialization, this is an understandable reaction, but critical force does not necessarily follow. Production affords its own competitive advantage for producers into which much effort is placed (May and Perry 2011b). As Rebecca Lave notes of the environmental sciences:

The same forces we see at work in our field sites shape the science underlying the policies we critique, as well as the counter-science we sometimes use to oppose them. We can no longer afford to ignore their interconnections in either our intellectual or political practice (2012: 32).

Disciplines constitute cities as objects and points of reference within paradigms that establish conventions about what is legitimate in the representation of cities. They produce knowledge of the physical dimension of cities and include: architecture, surveying, planning, medicine, engineering, physical geography, technology, hydrology, meteorology and geology. Disciplines producing knowledge of the social dimensions of cities include: economics, history, sociology, politics, human geography and social anthropology. The humanities, such as art, music, photography, literature and poetry, also provide texts and forms of representations that seek to record and even transcend the experiential dimensions of the city in aesthetic representation and interpretation.
Each of these practices of representation of the ‘urban’ become attributed with different levels of significance and so do not only reflect practice, but also interact and construct its forms. However, recent years have witnessed a growing acknowledgement that discipline-specific understandings are limited and perhaps even counterproductive in that they should not over-extend into domains that are not within their epistemic grasp. For knowledge, urban practice and policy and sustainability to become more aligned for the future, we still have some way to go before we can understand how different disciplinary perspectives can enhance the quality of experience, well-being and reduce the ecological footprint of city life:

Climate change is recognized by many as a crisis that is calling into question our whole approach to development…it must also be seen as calling into question the ways in which we develop and use knowledge. Even those who see climate change as an urgent issue, for the most part, lack a framework for coherently integrating the findings of distinct sciences, on the one hand, and for integrating those findings with political discourse and action, on the other (Bhaskar and Parker 2010: vii).

Disciplinary silo cultures add to the mix of political and economic expectations placed upon universities. Sealed off from one another through cultural and financial practices, it is hard to produce anything like multi-disciplinary, let alone inter-disciplinary research. The environment is left to be divided up according to a disciplinary gaze that compartmentalises according to its procedures and whose credibility depends upon its acceptability within dominant practices. An instituted fragmentation enables the forms of specialisation that exists within policy circles, but at the same time enables particular constructions of economic action.

To add to the self-fulfilling circularity between ideas and practices, economists and business school representatives are invoked and utilised to promote urban policies, whilst physical scientists whose procedures remain within the domains of their control, may be among the favoured in terms of the potential of their work for commercialisation. Expectations, according to an interpretation of environmental ‘imperatives’ then falls upon disciplines in different ways according to their degrees of epistemic permeability (May with Perry 2011: Chp 4).

A neoliberal imaginary runs through these processes and promotes fragmentation through selectivity and speed. An alternative emphasis drawn from John Dewey on pre-political cooperation as a precondition of individual freedom, for example, would meet with charges of
‘interference’ in the natural economy and the ‘threat’ of ‘big Government’ stifling liberty. An embrace of fragmentation within the academy is ably served by invoking ideas of autonomy according to an individualistic model of the transparency of desires and intentionality of meaning. Indeed, even the most devout of poststructuralists can fall back on this when seeking to defend encroachments on their work. Claims to autonomy lead to a separation between an idealised conception of a right and its necessary institutional enablement (Butler 2006). That leaves academics vulnerable to the calculations of managerialism (May 2005; 2007) and uneasy parallels in apparently different practices (May and Perry forthcoming).

In these environments differences between academics are accentuated and this results in a bewildering inability to understand changing institutional boundaries and their implications for all who work within them. Expertise resides in the exceptionality of the individual and that means to recognise the relations between content, context, character and consequence is undermined by claims based on individualistic tendencies which celebrate only one element. Like the circulation of models and tool kits, expertise rests upon universal and aspatial assumptions and is free to be transferred on the academic market; it is a delicious context-free recipe, for those who can sample in its delights, that adds to the triumph of individualism over a relational understanding and whilst subject to philosophical deconstruction, a separation between knower and known lives on in the practical arrangements of the university as an organisation.

**Seeking Places of Possibility in Spaces of Permanent Promise**

Explanations of those forces that exert influences on urban and university transformations are linked by a common assumption: there is inherently something different about the dynamics of knowledge itself in the knowledge economy that signals the need for a fundamental change in relations, expectations and organisation. Yet in both policy and disciplinary terms, there is a fragmentation of responses and a failure to learn from the past which is manifest in approaches to matters of urban infrastructural development (May et al 2010).

What we then find in the relations between problems and solutions is the circulation of models of apparent success moving from one context to another in an alignment of abstraction
between production and reception. To paraphrase Marx, in the space occupied by exemplary politics we find the model of reality becoming the reality of the model. The city is not just a unit of analysis, but a place in which knowledge is created in different places, disseminated in various ways, acted upon, denied and ignored. The challenge is to bring into being new ways of interacting in the relations between knowledge and action. Sense making needs context and knowledge needs to be both context-sensitive. From there intelligent action is more likely to follow given that: “the chances of translating knowledge for action into knowledge in action are immeasurably improved once it is recognized that the probability to realize knowledge is dependent on context specific social, political and economic conditions” (Stehr 1992: 121).

A neoliberal viewpoint runs on forms of recognition that seek to revise contexts in the name of selective, imaginary futures based on extraction disguised as opportunity. Context is an impediment and admissible as a site of the implementation of a will to do something ‘to’ and ‘for’, not somewhere in which people live and with whom to act ‘with’. The focus is on the permanent promise of possibility not the places and the issues facing the excluded whose existence detracts from that ambition. Whilst academics seek to establish the ‘truths’ of globalization, politicians and policy-makers also bring it into reality ensuring the reproduction of its naturalization: “globalization is taken to be real because the various retroscriptive and proscriptive narratives about it have become normalized in and through practice, thus rendering it plausible” (Cameron and Palan 2004: 87. Original Emphasis).

Exemplary politics involves the selected representation of particular spaces for inward investment, not a highlighting of the invisible places of daily problems facing local populations. Efforts to attract capital to cities are constructed as necessity through the naturalization of competition, whilst politico-spatial responses to social exclusion are very different in form. The latter rests on local and community-based solutions and creating market opportunities for private providers in the terrain formerly occupied by public provision. In efforts at attraction we find a celebration of the spatially boundless circulation of capital, whilst in terms of actually existing conditions boundaries are reinforced through a localism agenda disguised as empowerment. New economies are formed in the process whose role: “is all too often a means of providing a limited degree of local poverty relief in a manner that reduces the political and
fiscal risk to the state and the mainstream economy, whilst at the same time relieving the private sector of any responsibility at all” (Cameron and Palan 2004: 150).

In these dynamics we find the perpetuation of attempts to conceive a post-political settlement with disastrous results for issues associated with equity and the relationship that clearly exists between Government policies and the forms of global capitalism that manifest themselves in particular contexts (Crouch 2004). Divorcing responsibility for political decisions according to what is presented as global threats or opportunities as necessity is frequent among contemporary politicians as they fight for a middle ground that is presumed to exist, but is constituted by their practices. An evaluation of practices then depends on demonstrating their effectiveness according to narrowly conceived outcomes whose processes involve the anticipation and population of what is considered to be ‘success’. Anticipatory decision-making fills a gap in constituting communication aimed at understanding. Efforts go into imaginations of preferred outcomes, whilst officials act according to the preferences of the powerful without any dialogue concerning the realities of their expectations; after all, good performance is about ‘making it happen’ not raising issues concerning practical impediments to the realization of unrealistic ambitions. The casualty is a politics in which to construct alternatives.

These processes are reified relations. However, this is not in the sense that relations between things are manifest in relations between people such that the latter can flourish in the absence of a system that fetishises the former, for this is ‘cultural capitalism’: “one no longer sells (and buys) objects which ‘bring’ cultural or emotional experiences, one directly sells (and buys) such experiences” (Žižek 2009: 139). Suggesting a need for clarity through invoking actually existing contexts in the face of this hyperbole goes against a powerful force: the production of meaning to enable investments in the practices of institutions. To call attention to the real difficulties of urban development and knowledge production is given a new twist: “the function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (Žižek 1989: 45).

There are benefits to this state of affairs. The constitution of civil society rests upon the expectation that expert knowledge feeds into rational deliberation with a resulting progression, politically speaking, towards a better states of affairs. In this way an educated public is said to
exist alongside other interests with the result that different voices are mobilised according to some conception of the common good. Risk, accountability and issues of legitimacy, particularly with reference to the impartiality of institutions such as universities to generate knowledge free from powerful interests, become highly problematic when mixed (Turner 2004). Given the changing nature of knowledge capitalism and how that is being taken up in different contexts, however, we end up in a paradoxical situation: a growing scepticism towards the impartiality of expertise on the part of the public and the deployment of knowledge for urban representation on the other.

Because the complexity of the urban world and its understanding is informed by the practices described above, it cannot be adequately represented and explained, let alone transformed. For this purpose, we need to take seriously a series of antagonisms, or ‘devilish dichotomies’ (Perry and May 2010) within the university and beyond. We need to recognize that our ways of understanding are based on outdated ideas to which we cling in order to provide meaning in a world increasingly fragmented by the global powers of capitalism. Not only do political institutions need to change, but our relations to them as well: “If the historical motto of the bourgeoisie has been, ‘no taxation without representation’, our motto should be, ‘no implementation of decisions without sharing in the making of decisions’” (Castoriadis 1991: 240).

For knowledge practices to become more attuned to the potential for greater democratic participation in urban development two features of science, informed in the development of modernity, are placed in doubt: uniformity and stability. As before, these parallel changes in the nation-state informed by processes of decoupling (people, organizations and sub-systems) and detraditionalization (decline of commitment, routine and traditional loyalties) (Offe 1996). An alternative emphasis for scientific endeavour, as well as expectations of State action now arises: “to provide the elbow-room we need in order to protect diversity and adaptability” (Toulmin 1992: 183. Original Emphasis).

A consequence of this move is that if outdated expectations are placed upon the relations between knowledge and action, disappointment is inevitable and we risk more uncertainty, not less. There are good reasons to regard disappointment as an important condition of maturity: “if
we are able to changes ourselves, it is in the direction of finding better ways to live with ourselves” (Craib 1994: 179). That is not easy and as I have argued, enormous energies go into the practices of perpetuation, but we also find avoidance, denial and falsehood (Rowe 2011).

The difficulties and issues I have described have structured a whole set of practices which reproduce dominant assumptions and curtail alternatives. What is missing from critical accounts is a specific emphasis on the overall framing of debates and how the gap between national aspirations and local conditions relates to the capacities and capabilities to work towards alternative knowledge-based futures. A greater focus upon innovative neighbourhood initiatives also enables the cracks and spaces in the current governance relations to be detected (Swyngedouw and Moulaert 2010).

With decentralization and autonomy being “primary vehicles for producing greater inequality through neoliberalization” (Harvey 2012: 83), attention needs to turn to governance arrangements at different scales of action and with what consequences for communities? That, in turn, means opening up the antagonisms between the conception of national policies and their execution in local conditions through a focus upon the urban commons and taking back the economy (Harvey 2012; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013). It follows from the arguments presented here and elsewhere that resistance in universities will be meaningful: “once the transformation of the state and the wholesale revision of what constitutes knowledge are duly acknowledged” (Quiddington 2010: 246). Without a consideration of these issues, how to make changes in places becomes secondary to empty political slogans concerning what future needs to be brought into being.

Active Intermediation in the Missing Middle

At no point has it been suggested that knowledge practices exist which run counter to the above trends. The account concerns the silencing and marginalization of alternatives, but also a cautionary note concerning how apparently critical viewpoints emanate from practices preserve the status quo. Talk of the problems of academic cultures, rather than just focus on managerialism as the internal enemy and forces external to the academy as anathema to the
preservation of autonomy and it does not take long to find the limits of a preparedness to engage in reflexive critique!

A project mentality, evident among consultants and academics, colludes with an absence of joined-up thinking. It does not present a challenge to the ideology and have described and frequently offers a justification for its continuation. We may be assured that this mentality is being played out when there is no commitment between projects and instead an overweening ambition to prove effectiveness in isolation from each other. Fragmentation is thus permitted an uninterrupted path. This is frequently accompanied by numerous meetings when process is the central pre-occupation and where values that inform its overall purpose are subsumed into a process mentality divorced from context. Once again, such a mentality lends itself to model transfer, the absence of learning and the apparent innovation of project managers whose process mentality may be bolstered by the latest project management software. The result is to perpetuate what must be first be disrupted in order to be re-assembled.

How can changes in the social organization of knowledge production assist this process? I have noted how changes need to take place more generally in the field of governance, how we see and approach the economy and also in cultures. Too many ambitions and efforts have been sacrificed on alters of unrealistic expectations from within politics, policy, university management and occupational cultures. Those outside of the confines of professional communities need to be more involved and that means engaging in different fields of activity and crossing boundaries, with those persons being positioned accordingly in order that responses are not so easily subject to individualism.

In practice, this necessitates high degrees of work at understanding from all those concerned and to make this the sole task of researchers who are subject to different capacities and operate within cultures whose efforts are directed in other ways, is unrealistic. All too often the difficulties inherent in making these expectations work in practice are displaced by narrow measures that confuse, rather than clarify, what needs to be done, with whom, using what resources and according to what collective outcomes. These forms of working overwhelm innovative practice and learning. Allusions to ignorant and resistant publics or academic obfuscation are not helpful in this process. There is no substitute for continual efforts that are
aimed at coherent, consistent, coordinated and well communicated understandings between parties. Such work is not an annoying distraction, but a necessary pre-condition for facing contemporary challenges. That means creating spaces in which it is acceptable to combine knowledge and imagination free from immediate consequence and also a preparedness to admit of and learn from failures.

In these spaces, there is not only a need for new ideas, but the integration of what is already known and that runs counter to academic cultures and forms of audit of research that emphasize ‘cutting-edge’ (May and Perry 2013). In the search for the new, we must not forget the past. Disparate knowledges can be integrated, seen alongside each other and re-contextualized. Sharing individual understandings can generate new social learning. Only then does it become possible to know when and how knowledge has had particular outcomes that are seen, by different parties, to have had benefits or contain potentials.

The conditions under and through which social research generated in universities can or cannot be taken forward, as well having a sense of the consequences of that knowledge for subsequent action and possessing the capability to do so, can easily be bracketed out in assumptions informing connections between knowledge and action. Saying that one has a wish to learn is not the same as learning, whilst the time frames in which knowledge may or may not have applicability varies, as do scales of activity and their consequences for localities and general policies. Occupational cultures in all organizations can place learning at a low premium and governments, universities and research councils fund work in allusions to something called the global and competitive knowledge economy – as if the work of cooperation and the effort needed for learning were not a necessary part of the reality of knowledge production itself, as well as what is done with that knowledge (Perry et al 2013).

Key to this transformation is an understanding and recognition of different cultures of enquiry and reception, as well as the limitations to current understanding. Knowledge must be produced and communicated rather than simply transferred. Knowledge needs to be actively received, understood and interpreted and its processes of production informed by different groups: knowledge for action and knowledge about action require new forms of interaction. Knowledge exchange does not therefore take place between two separate spheres of activity,
but is a space of communication where different cultures of enquiry, production and reception can engage.

In terms of the contemporary representation of urban issues as problems, there are different forms of knowledge, relating to a variety of motivations and understandings that together constitute distinct reactions to the ‘same’ sets of issues. A number of other issues act to prevent a simple problem-solution equation that policy makers, politicians and academics reach for in their desire to ‘apply’ knowledge. At this point technology often steps in. Technology can be used to access information quickly and efficiently, but explicit knowledge relates to tacit knowledge, so there are limits to codification as a solution. All too often technology is seen as a panacea to problems. Context matters. There are limits to deploying forms of communication that only accelerate information, but do little to add to intelligence. Understanding the context in which research is produced and received is critical in ensuring effective knowledge use in practice. Being context-sensitive is not the same as being context-dependent, for the former allows for revision in the process of joint-learning.

Spaces of communication for the production of ‘excellent-relevant’ knowledge (Perry and May 2010) for urban growth are constituted over time through changes in dispositions and mentalities, new processes and ways of working. Fundamentally, the ideas of active intermediation and urban knowledge arenas in the missing middle are based on processes and constitute social arenas for the discussion and contestation of knowledge for and in cities and city-regions are inclusive, imagined and brought into being by the collective actions of multiple partners rather than the forging of institutional mechanisms (May with Perry 2011; May et al 2009). The conditions for meaningful spaces of communication to emerge can be created through actively mediating between national and regional interests and between multiple partners in urban settings.

**Summary**

We need active intermediation between research and different social interests in order to mutually constitute a shared understanding of the need for knowledge exchange. Transformations also need to occur at other scales of activity in order to overcome the stifling
narrowness of neoliberalism. We need a mode of operation in which knowledge is produced by interaction between parties, allowing the know-how of practice to inform the production of knowledge for practice. This is challenging not only to research funders and performers, but to politicians and policy-makers at multiple scales of action. The space of communication is absent and we have found knowledge, context and action existing in a dynamic tension that is so often unconnected. A missing middle, composed of the unarticulated and unrealistic expectations placed upon all in the research process, without a mutual understanding being developed, is apparent. As our experiences in urban research make clear, it is not an easy process to achieve this and certainly not one that can be undertaken in isolation at particular scales of activity.

There are no quick fixes to this process and models and ideas are moved across contexts as if they were a panacea for social and environmental problems, thereby relieving their recipients of the efforts needed to reach understanding, let alone coordinate their actions. We face different and common challenges. Having cultures in which it is possible to admit of ignorance, not just celebrate expertise and yet being confident and competent enough in to engage in joint knowledge production, are hard to come by. The world is richer than particular acts of representation can capture and learning is a two-way process. To enable this we need to overcome the narrowness of neoliberalism in our search for new ways of making the urban commons a reality for sustainable and fair futures.

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**Notes**

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