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## Critical Explanation in Social Science: a Logics Approach

Jason Glynos and David Howarth\*

The terms *critical* and *explanation* are more often than not separated out in contemporary and modern conceptions of philosophy and (social) science. Kant's critical project drew a sharp line between theoretical and practical reason – between the domains of knowledge and morality – and positivists have strengthened the split between questions of fact and explanation, and questions of critique and normative evaluation, by emphasizing the value neutrality of social scientific inquiry. Weber too championed the cause of a “value-free” social theory, though for him this meant the “intrinsically simple demand that the investigator and teacher should keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts... and his own practical evaluations” of them. Weber thus distinguishes between the “value-relevance” of the social sciences, in which he accepts that “judgements of interest” are implicated in the choice of a particular research object, and the necessary “value-freedom” of the social scientist with respect to the way she conducts her research and the way she uses the results of her research. He thus rejects the belief that researchers should employ their theories and explanations to support a specific political practice, project or ideology. At the heart of this more nuanced conception of the relationship between values and social science is Weber's wish to exclude partisanship and overt political bias in the production and dissemination of knowledge, though it stems in equal measure from his commitment to naturalism in the sciences, and his ambivalent attitude toward lawlike and causal explanations in the natural sciences.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Weber's philosophy and methodology of social science constitutes a vast field of inquiry, and has provoked perennial dispute (see, for example, Owen, 1994; Parkin, 1982, 17–39; Ringer, 1997, 2004; Runciman, 1972). Nonetheless, it is possible to say that despite his best efforts to articulate a consistent philosophy of social science, his work remains tantalisingly torn between a desire to satisfy the demands of (subjective) interpretative understanding and (objective) causal explanation. Indeed, alongside the intrinsic question marks surrounding the role and functioning of the various concepts he develops, the relationships between the different elements of his approach are systematically tension-ridden (see Runciman, 1972). On the one hand, Weber prioritizes the operation of *verstehen* (interpretive understanding). Understanding the sense and significance of an action or practice from this perspective is a necessary condition for the meaningfulness of cultural science itself, including its “statistical uniformities” and “sociological generalizations” (Weber, 1978, 12). Without this “significance test” a law or statistical probability would be “worthless for the understanding of action in the real world” (Weber, 1978, 11). In this respect, laws, empirical generalizations, and conceptual types are no more than preliminary devices or heuristic steps in the search for knowledge of historical particulars.

There have been a number of stern rebukes to these dominant understandings. For example, the first generation of Critical Theorists took their target to be the complicities and partialities of “traditional theory”, which they traced back to Descartes and the origins of modern philosophy, though it was especially evident in the hegemony of nineteenth and twentieth century positivism. Traditional theory in its various guises takes natural science and especially mathematics to be its paradigm, thereby privileging deductive and inductive reasoning, coupled with the desire to provide complete and systematic picture of the world external to thought. However, in his “Traditional and Critical Theory”, Max Horkheimer stresses the way in which the purveyors of traditional theory are submerged in particular social worlds and practices, which they then serve to buttress by presenting the generation, character and use of scientific knowledge as neutral and objective. Thus, what is overlooked is how its conception of knowledge is integrally connected to the solving of problems *within* taken for granted structures, especially the dominant forms of economic production.

This article puts forward a particular approach to the task of critical explanation, which arises from our book *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (2007). Our approach is predicated on the articulation of a social ontology that stresses the *radical contingency* and *structural incompleteness* of all systems of social relations. In so doing, we draw heavily on what in Lacanian theory is conceptualized as the disruptive presence of “the real” in any symbolic order – a presence that marks the impossibility of any putative fullness of being, whether at the level of structures, subjects or discourses.

The centrality of this ontological starting-point requires us to say a little more by way of its justification. We begin by assuming that any legitimate approach to social and political analysis requires at least some ontological assumptions and commitments (see Connolly, 2006; Hay, 2006). But the commitment to ontology can mean different things. For some, the articulation of an ontological framework consists in providing a kind of “furniture of the world” that sets out the sorts of things, and their respective properties, which we encounter in engaging with objects and other subjects. However, in our view the importance of ontology is not just about *what* sorts of things exist, but *that* they exist and *how* they exist. Indeed, of

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On the other hand, however, the interpretive understanding of subjectively meaningful behaviour sits uncomfortably with the call for “non-interpretable uniformities underlying what has appeared to be specifically meaningful action”, even though he thinks that “little has been accomplished in this direction thus far” (Weber, 1978, 7–8). This is even more evident when Weber appears to consider it “indispensable” in the social sciences that we verify “subjective interpretation by comparison with the concrete course of events”, in which the latter involves tests of “subjective adequacy”. By “subjective adequacy”, Weber means “adequacy on the level of meaning”, as well as “causal adequacy”, which is predicated on the probability that “according to established generalizations from experience”, an action or sequence of events “will always actually occur in the same way” (Weber, 1978, 11). And while Weber declares the true object of sociological research to be the singular causal analysis of concrete particularities – individual events and processes – he does not explicitly exclude the search for generalities and universals.

capital importance in this regard is the fact that objects and subjects are marked by an “essential instability” that problematizes a simple listing of their necessary intrinsic properties and causal capacities. Of greater importance for us therefore are their contingency, historicity and precariousness. Indeed, in terms of social and political analysis, this perspective enables us to highlight the *constructed* and *political* character of social objectivity, and then to articulate a connected series of concepts and logics that can help us to analyze social relations and processes, while remaining faithful to our ontological commitments.

In this article we present the main features of our logics approach, illustrating it systematically with reference to existing empirical studies of the recent reforms in the UK higher education system, concerning the research and teaching auditing regimes recently installed. Before doing so, however, we situate our approach to critical explanation in relation to other approaches to social science explanation.

## 1 Logics: Beyond Contextualized Self-Interpretations and Causal Mechanisms

The locution “logics of critical explanation” responds to at least two challenges in contemporary social science. The first challenge is to think beyond the *causal law* paradigm, in which the ideals of prediction and deduction are overemphasized and historical context is given short shrift, while the second is to go further than the two main responses to the causal law paradigm. The latter consists of those approaches that focus either on *contextualized self-interpretations* (which stems from hermeneutical thinkers such as Winch, Taylor, Bevir and Rhodes), but which overemphasize the particularity of historical context, or those that emphasize the role of *causal mechanisms* (which arises from the neo-positivist or critical realist traditions, and theorists such as Elster, Bhaskar, Shapiro), but which do not escape the shadow of the causal law paradigm. Our “turn to logics”, therefore, may be better appreciated by briefly contrasting our approach with these responses to the causal law paradigm.

For hermeneuticists such as Winch, Taylor, and Bevir and Rhodes, self-interpretations constitute an essential starting point of social science research. Positivists and behaviouralists, by contrast, tend to concentrate exclusively on observable facts and “public opinions”, consigning the conditions of such facts and opinions to the background.<sup>2</sup> This follows from the fact that positivists and behaviouralists

2 By the term positivism we mean to capture the following features usually associated with it: “unity of method”, especially as concerns the hypothetico-deductive method, “value neutrality”, and “fact neutrality”. But our use of the term is broad enough to include not just what we might call a “constant conjunction positivism” but also a “depth realist positivism”. As Steinmetz points out, a significant development in the evolution of positivism during the latter half of the twentieth century saw the empiricism associated with Hume and the logical positivists (which entailed a passage through human experience) disarticulated from the epistemological commitment to constant conjunctions itself. This made it possible for someone working within the positivist tradition to commit to a much stronger notion of causation involving real unobservables with



inhabit a world of normal and routinized science, where issues of ontology have been naturalized and thus excluded from view. Whereas positivists reduce meanings and self-interpretations to facts and observable behaviour, hermeneuticists focus on the meanings and self-interpretations of actors. Indeed, the hermeneutical gesture adds something more to self-interpretations, either by rendering the implicit practices more explicit by adducing the rules that govern them, or by offering interpretations of the self-interpretations, which themselves are guided by certain ethical and normative impulses. This process generates what we have termed contextualized self-interpretations.

Importantly, however, there are moments when the background conditions that form our normal practices come to the fore. These are moments of failure or breakdown when the normal ways of going on are interrupted and their contingency is potentially disclosed. In Heidegger's terms, the figures of the "broken hammer" or the "misplaced screwdriver" are indicators of the taken-for-granted background conditions of existence. In the case of a broken or misplaced tool, for instance, we encounter an object's "unreadiness-to-hand", in which our normal relationship with the tool, and its relationship with other tools and equipment, no longer holds. This leads us to focus on an important, if backgrounded, quality of objects as such: that we encounter them primarily as "ready-to-hand" (i.e., available to do things with) rather than as "present-at-hand" (i.e., available to be inspected in purely theoretical or cognitive terms).

We are thus led to focus on the being of such objects – their status as equipment which we use for certain assignments and tasks – as well as the ways in which we encounter things (their "readiness to hand"). More fully, it shows that we encounter things in "worlds" of related objects, whether it be the workshop, the classroom, or parliament, and that we ourselves are always "in" these worlds, both in the sense that we are involved with things in this world, and in the sense that we inhabit these worlds. These experiences can, in short, help us to clarify the "worldhood" of the world, the nature of our involvement in it, as well as the nature of ourselves. In Heidegger's terms they lead us to see ourselves fundamentally as "being-in-the-world", not as agents or subjects that are outside and acting upon such worlds.

Moments of disruption and contingency are equally important in social and political terms, because they make possible new identifications and novel political practices. This allows us to briefly introduce our three logics of critical explanation, whose role is to connect the world of practices and self-interpretations to our critical explanations of them. How exactly does this occur, and how does our account differ from the hermeneutical and naturalist alternatives?

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causal properties (Steinmetz, 2005, 32). For a good historical overview of positivism in twentieth century social science, see the collection of essays in Steinmetz 2005 which chart positivism's vicissitudes, prompting one to ask "why positivism is perpetually disavowed and unconsciously embraced" (Steinmetz, 2005, 31).

A hermeneutical inquiry not only pushes the study of society beyond the given facts and behaviour to the meaning and interpretation of facts, but it also moves beyond self-interpretations to the study of rules and the interpretation of self-interpretations. Hermeneuticists thus seek to render the implicit explicit and to interpret self-interpretations, yielding contextualized self-interpretations. And while this investigative practice is particularly evident when we encounter institutions and activities that are not readily understood, such as those of a “primitive society”, it is also required to make sense of practices that are “closer to home” so to speak. This is because those involved in a practice may not be conscious of the rules they follow, nor able to explicate the rules they follow with any certainty, nor defend them if challenged. Think, for instance, of our normal use of a language, where people speak and write without necessarily being able to furnish the explicit rules it presupposes.

Notwithstanding the advantages of the hermeneutical perspective, our use of logics goes further than this, for the latter not only focus attention on the rules or grammar that enable us to characterize and even criticize a phenomenon, but they also seek to disclose the structures and conditions that make those rules possible. Importantly, both tasks are discharged in an ontologically-informed and analytically parsimonious way. The first task is accomplished by what we call social logics, while the second involves the mobilization of our other two sorts of logic – political and fantasmatic logics – in order to critically explain practices. These logics enable us to account for the institution, contestation and sedimentation of social practices and regimes. They “go beyond” contextualized self-interpretations because they speak to the latter’s contingent constitution and sedimentation, focusing attention on the way their “ignoble origins” are generally forgotten or covered over as the practices and their self-understanding are then lived out (Nietzsche, 1973, 177).

Now it is clear that those who stress the role of causal mechanisms also go beyond the field of self-interpretations. For example, though Elster stresses the indeterminacy of their triggering and interaction, he uses mechanisms to provide a causal connection between phenomena and events. But he brackets the ontological conditions of possibility of these mechanisms, and thus underplays their organic and dynamic relation to self-interpretations and their contexts. More precisely, according to this model, mechanisms are atomic units which can be combined to form molecular units in which the identities of the atomic units are not moderated by the context in which they are used.<sup>3</sup> This view ignores the parasitic relationship between social processes and human practices. In other words, Elster short-circuits the passage through the subject by conceiving mechanisms as a set of “abstract es-

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3 As Elster puts it, though his “focus is on elementary or atomic mechanisms that cannot be broken down further into simpler constituents” (1999, 20), thus comprising the basic units of the social science *explanans*, they can also combine in a range of ways, producing more complex, *molecular* mechanisms (Elster, 1999, 32–6).

sences” or free standing “tools” that are not tied to any ontology, and which can be applied to different contexts without modification.

In contrast to Elster’s picture, Roy Bhaskar’s stress on causal mechanisms does move us to the ontological level. He begins by correctly rejecting the “epistemic fallacy”, which reduces and thus restricts the investigation of being to our knowledge claims about it. Thus Bhaskar and his school are concerned with the way the world has to be in order for knowledge claims to be possible at all. And his answer is that the world is composed of an underlying set of *real objects* or *structures* with specific properties and generative mechanisms. The latter are presupposed in our actions and experiences at the phenomenological level, and they make possible our knowledge of the world at the epistemological level.

The problem with this approach, however, is that it restricts the understanding of ontology to an elaboration of the sorts of objects and mechanisms that make up the (social) world. By contrast, our poststructuralist ontology is not reducible to an inventory of the kinds of things in the world – the “furniture of the world”, so to speak. Indeed, in our view this does not really break with the “epistemic fallacy” at all, but displaces the latter to a deeper level of “real objects”, which though not necessarily visible in our experience of them, still bring about certain outcomes or effects. Ontology in our view is not only about the different *kinds* of things in the world, but more importantly about the *being* of these beings. We follow Heidegger here by focusing on the historicity and contingency of beings – and not just the contingent interaction of fully constituted causal mechanisms – wherein the meaning and identity of beings depends on the historical and relational contexts in which they appear.

## 2 Presuppositions of our Approach

What then, more precisely, are our ontological presuppositions? Our first premise is that all practices and regimes are discursive entities, in the sense in which Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe understand the “discursive” nature of all actions, practices and social formations. For them, the notion of discourse signals the centrality of meaning to practices. Although, as they put it, a “stone exists independently of any system of social relations... it is, for instance, either a projectile or an object of aesthetic contemplation only within a specific discursive configuration” (Laclau and Mouffe in Laclau, 1990, 101). In other words, an object’s identity is conferred by the particular discourses or systems of meaning within which it is constituted. In short, social practices can coalesce into constellations or systems of practices which we call regimes, and both practices and regimes are located within a field of discursive social relations.

Crucially, however, a further axiomatic premise of our ontological framework is the idea that any field of discursive social relations is marked by radical contingency, where radical contingency refers to the inherent (as opposed to accidental) instability of an object's identity. The significance of *radical* or *ontological* contingency is highlighted when contrasted with *empirical* or *ontical* contingency, as evident in Bhaskar's critical realism or in Popper's commitment to epistemic fallibilism. By empirical contingency we aim to capture a sense of possibility: the possibility that contingency *may* be absorbed by a higher order process. For example, what appears to us now as a contingent event – a solar eclipse say – may be represented or spatialized by its being subsumed under a higher-order process – the planetary laws of motion. However, the appeal to radical contingency in a social science context contests this familiar subsumptive move which is characteristic of the natural sciences. Radical contingency opposes empirical contingency's sense of possibility with a sense of *impossibility*: the *constitutive* failure of any objectivity to attain a full identity. Other formulations of radical contingency as an ontological premise include "lack in the Other" (Lacan), "structural undecidability" (Derrida), and so on, all of which question the idea of a fully constituted essence of a practice, regime or object, in the name of an irreducible negativity that cannot be reabsorbed (see Coole, 2000).

The way this ontological premise is affirmed is critical for us, because radical contingency not only shapes our understanding of different elements of our discourse theoretical approach, such as practices, regimes, and logics, but it also ties them together.

### 3 Logics

As we have seen, influenced principally by Heidegger, Lacan, and Laclau and Mouffe, but also drawing on Foucault, Wittgenstein, and Derrida, we put forward an ontology premised on the radical contingency of social relations. In articulating this basic ontological standpoint, we take our principal objects of investigation to be *practices* or *regimes of practices*, where our aim is to critically explain their transformation, stabilization, and maintenance. We formalize the category of a logic against this ontological background. In general terms, our conception of a logic is designed to capture the purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible, intelligible, and vulnerable. An understanding of the logic of a practice aims, therefore, not just to describe or characterize it, but to capture the various conditions which make that practice "work" or "tick". More fully, and as already mentioned, we develop a three-fold typology of logics for the purpose of conducting critical explanations, which we name social, political, and fantasmatic logics, and which we can briefly sketch out as follows.

When we talk of *social* logics we are primarily interested in characterizing *what* a particular social practice or regime is. But we can also ask *why* and *how* they came about and continue to be sustained. This turns our attention to the operation of political and fantasmatic logics. If social logics assist in the task of directly characterizing practices and regimes along a synchronic axis, then political logics can be said to focus more on the diachronic aspects of a practice or regime, thus explicating the way they have emerged, or are contested and/or transformed. Political logics aim to capture processes of collective mobilization, such as the construction, defence, and naturalization of new frontiers. But they also include processes which seek to interrupt or break up this process of drawing frontiers.

We follow Ernesto Laclau here in thinking of political logics as comprising logics of equivalence and logics of difference (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, Ch. 3). Logics of equivalence and difference thus emphasize the dynamic process by which political frontiers are constructed, stabilized, strengthened, or weakened. Put in other terms, the logic of equivalence entails the construction and privileging of antagonistic relations. For instance, a national liberation struggle against an occupying colonial power will typically attempt to cancel out the particular differences of class, ethnicity, region, or religion in the name of a more universal nationalism that can serve as a common reference point for all the oppressed; indeed, its identity may be virtually exhausted in its opposition to the oppressive regime. By contrast, the logic of difference draws on other discourses in an attempt to break down these chains of equivalence. The age-old practice of “divide and rule”, for instance, in which an occupying power seeks to separate ethnic or national groups into particular communities or indirect systems of rule, is invariably designed to prevent the articulation of demands and identities into a generalized challenge to the dominant regime.

We turn now to fantasmatic logics in order to add a further explanatory and critical layer to the process of accounting for change or continuity. If political logics provide a politically-inflected signifying frame within which to show *how* social practices come into being or are transformed, then fantasmatic logics provide the means to understand *why* specific practices and regimes grip subjects. To use Laclauian terms from a different though related context, if political logics concern *signifying operations*, fantasmatic logics concern the *force* behind those operations (Laclau, 2005, 101). Or, to put it in Lacanian terms, if political reality involves a symbolic construction, “it nevertheless depends on fantasy in order to constitute itself” (Stavrakakis, 1999, 81). For us, then, fantasmatic logics contribute to our understanding of the resistance to change of social practices (the “inertia” of social practices), but *also* the speed and direction of change when it does happen (the “vector” of political practices). Whether in the context of social practices or political practices, fantasy operates so as to conceal or “close off” the radical contingency of social relations. It does this through a fantasmatic narrative or logic that promises



a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome – the beatific dimension of fantasy – or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable, which might be termed the horrific dimension of fantasy. For example, images of omnipotence or of total control would represent the beatific dimension, while images of impotence or victimhood would represent the horrific dimension of such fantasmatic attempts to achieve or maintain closure (Stavrakakis, 1999, 108–9; Glynos, 2001, 93–6). Of course, the logic of fantasy (in the singular) appears ontically in many guises – hence our use of the term fantasmatic logics (in the plural). On the whole, though, with fantasmatic logics we aim to capture the way subjects organize their enjoyment.

#### 4 Logics and Tasks of Critical Explanation

The function of logics in social scientific analysis is not only to make social processes more intelligible, but in the process of *describing* and *explaining*, it should also furnish the possibility of a *critical* engagement with the practices and processes under investigation. Indeed, *all* logics carve out a space for a *critical* conception of explanation because they all presuppose the non-necessary character of social relations. This means that the very identification, characterization, and naming of a discursive pattern as a social logic is already to engage in a process with a normative and political valence. And this is simply to emphasize that the identity of a practice cannot be taken for granted. In fact, the process of invoking and deploying political logics to show the contingent institution of social practices is already to signal their non-necessary character, and to begin the normative task of contemplating alternative practices and regimes. But the same is true of fantasmatic logics. While the latter contribute to our account of the *grip* or ideology of racism in a descriptive and explanatory sense, they also furnish the ontological resources with which to open up ethical possibilities and thus to engage critically with the practices under investigation.

The three interrelated component logics of our overarching “logic of critical explanation” can also be grasped by relating them to the ontical/ontological distinction and to the cognate notion of a *quasi-transcendental* inquiry. Recall first that whereas social logics are substantive, in the sense that their identity is virtually coterminous with the social practices and contexts they inform and make possible, political logics have a formal aspect, enabling us to specify them with some precision independently of the fields of meaning within which they operate. And the same is true of fantasmatic logics because we can separate out the ontological from the ontical aspects in a more robust way than is possible in the case of social logics. More fully, when we talk about the *logic* of fantasy (in the singular) we draw attention to the *onto*-logical dimension of the concept: the process by means of which the subject



*enjoys* in such a way as to conceal the radical contingency of social reality. But when we talk about fantasmatic *logics* (in the plural) we refer to the myriad ways in which the logic of fantasy, conceived ontologically, is rendered manifest at the ontical level. Thus, when we talk about the logic of equivalence, the logic of difference, and the logic of fantasy, we foreground the ontological dimension of our inquiry because each of them is understood to be constitutive of our practices and regimes, including the different ways in which subjects experience and mediate social reality.

As to the quasi-transcendental aspect of our approach, it is important to stress that our concept of logics not only provides our objects of critical investigation with their conditions of *possibility*, but also furnishes their conditions of *impossibility* (see Derrida, 1989, 76–77). On the one hand, as we have stressed, our different types of logic enable us to describe and explain social practices by setting out their social, political and fantasmatic conditions of possibility. In the first instance, social logics enable us to specify the rules governing a particular social practice, as well as associated features and phenomena. But in addition, political and fantasmatic logics provide the resources to account for the emergence, formation and maintenance of particular social practices, focusing especially on their political constitution and the ways in which subjects are gripped by certain discourses and not others. On the other hand, however, because our concept of logics is predicated on the ultimate contingency of social relations, we can also account for the conditions of impossibility of a practice. In this regard, our three logics furnish us with the means to recover the options that were excluded or foreclosed in its constitution. But they also provide the conceptual resources with which to explore the way in which those excluded possibilities and/or the various forces that are constitutively excluded in the construction of any identity or regime render that identity vulnerable to being subverted and eventually transformed. In short, logics speak both to the possibility and impossibility of regimes and social practices.

Finally, we note that, for us, the appellation “quasi-transcendental” also captures the fact that our logics are *themselves* contingent and finite constructs that are contestable and revisable in the light of changing conditions and theoretical developments. This is most clear of course with respect to social logics, which we use to characterize particular social practices. But it is also true of political and fantasmatic logics, which we use to draw out the implications associated with the contingency of regimes and social practices. Though political and fantasmatic logics *qua* ontological categories are highly formal, they are nonetheless the concrete products of history. (In Laclau’s terms, following Marx’s analysis of capital, they are “real abstractions”.) In other words, no matter how robust political and fantasmatic logics are in relation to social logics and practices, their subject-dependence and their quasi-transcendental status serves to remind us of their historical character. This means that our *ontological framework is itself historical and ultimately contingent and*

*contestable*. Moreover, there is the methodological possibility of incorporating this self-reflexive and self-critical ethos into one's critical-explanatory practice.

What then does the task of incorporating a self-reflexive and self-critical ethos into the concrete problematization and explanation of social phenomena entail? On the one hand, the ontological postulates of our approach concerning radical contingency have to inform the construction, investigation and explanation of social phenomena. On the other hand, we must develop a style of research that builds contingency into its very *modus operandi*, and which is open and attentive to possibilities disclosed by the research itself.

For us, the focus on contingency is also tied to the practice of critique. One mode of critique involves combining Derrida and Foucault, generating a "deconstructive genealogy" of a social practice or regime. The task here is to reactivate and make evident these options that were foreclosed during the emergence of a practice – the clashes and forces which are repressed or defeated – in order to show how the present configuration of practices relies on exclusions that reveal the non-necessary character of the present social formation, and to explore the consequences and potential effects of such "repressions". On the other hand, in the mode of what we could call an *onto-ethical* critique the task is to critically interrogate the conditions under which a particular social practice or regime grips its subjects *despite* its non-necessary character. This mode of critique furnishes us with a means of critically interrogating the will to (fantasmatic) closure. However, both modes of critique are informed by an ethos of exercising a fidelity to contingency itself, by displaying other possibilities for political decision and identification, as well as other modalities of identification. Together they contribute to a practice of *ethico-political interpretation*.

The practice of *ethico-political* interpretation shares certain affinities with aspects of cognate approaches. Of particular relevance in this regard is the work of William Connolly. In short, Connolly advances an argument in favour of "an ethicopolitical orientation that both asserts that the fundamentals of being are mobile and that, in the ordinary course of events, social pressures accumulate to present particular formations of life as if they were intrinsic, solid, or complete" (Connolly, 1995, 34). Critical reflexivity of this sort he argues may promote agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (Connolly, 1995, 39–40), or what he and others elsewhere term "presumptive generosity". Here he advocates the loosening up of "sedimented forms" in order "to cultivate further a care for life (hopefully) *already there in protean form* – to incite energies on behalf of extending diversity where it is possible to do so" (Connolly, 1995, 34; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

We now turn to an analysis of UK's higher education reforms to illustrate the role that logics can play in furnishing critical explanations.

<sup>4</sup> "Differences, resistances, and protean energies flow through the 'perpetual gaps' within and between social formations, opening up possibilities for the politics of pluralization" (Connolly, 1995, 39).

## 5 Problematizing Higher Education Reforms in the UK

Initial research into the changing face of higher education in the UK must begin in our view by problematizing the different ways it has been problematized by key social actors. For the last twenty years, especially since the publication of the 1985 green paper “Higher Education into the 1980s”, successive governments and politicians of various hues have constructed the problem of the universities as one of making the latter serve the national economy “more effectively”; as one of expanding the numbers of students who attend universities; as one of developing globally competitive tertiary educational institutions; as one of driving down the unit costs of this expansion for the state and taxpayer alike; and so on. The “solutions” to the problems identified have included a greater role for markets and private capital to encourage competition between and within universities, the expansion of tertiary institutions, the introduction of student loans and the charging of student fees, as well as the development of a range of audit practices to increase the accountability of researchers and teachers working in universities, such as the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) and the Teaching Quality Audits (TQA).<sup>5</sup>

This problematization has resulted in policies and programmes that have led to rapid changes in the nature and functioning of UK universities. Stated baldly, there has been a shift from a mainly elitist, self-regulating, publicly funded system of higher education, where research was principally “pure” and supposedly disinterested, to a more mass-based system that is only partially funded by the public purse (Trow, 1994, 1998). In this new regime of practices, university teaching and research is strongly encouraged to support the interests of the wider society and economy, and universities have become more tightly regulated through a variety of economic and audit means.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the audit regime more generally, see Power 1997, 2004, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> These changes are borne out by a range of statistical indicators. In 2006–7, for example, over 2 million individuals, about 43 per cent of eligible young persons, attended 169 universities and colleges in the UK. The latter received approximately £15 billion in funding, of which about £10 billion came from central government, representing 2 per cent of the UK’s £0.5 trillion spending, or 1.1 per cent of the UK’s £1.2 trillion GDP. (Just to put this into context, the government’s 2006–7 spending on education as a whole, health, and social protection as a percentage of total spending is 15, 20, and 30 per cent respectively.) The remaining £5 billion came from external research contracts, overseas student fees, home/EU “top up fees”, charities, endowments, and other business income linked to universities. Of the £10 billion the government contributed to higher education, £7 billion was distributed via the Higher Education Funding Councils (with a research and teaching funding allocation ratio of about 1:4), and about £1 billion was distributed via the Research Councils (HM Treasury, 2006; Clark, 2006: 13, 16; Hefce, 2006).

This picture contrasts strongly with the situation in UK universities before Thatcher’s New Right reforms in the 1980s. Prior to the creation of “green field” universities in the early 1960s, as recommended in the Robbins Report (1963), the UK had an elite system of higher education, with only 5 per cent of young people going to university. In 2001–2, after the Robbins-inspired expansion and the abolition of the polytechnic-university divide, the proportion of 18–19 year olds attending university had grown to about 34 per cent. By 2006 there were about 43 per cent of under-30s participating, with the target for 2010 set at 50 per cent (Clark, 2006, 18–19).

Senior university managers and administrators, for their part, have constructed the problem of the universities largely in terms of adjusting and reforming their respective institutions to respond rationally and reasonably to the challenges within the constraints of the new regime. Acting individually and collectively, for example, vice chancellors and senior managers have sought at times to modify the new audit practices in ways that soften the impact of the changes on their staff and students, or have striven to interpret and implement the changes in a creative fashion. In the main, however, they have been unable or unwilling to challenge the construction and implementation of the new policies and practices.

The convergence between governments and senior managers arises in part because both sets of problematizations are underpinned by a similar understanding of the character and role of universities in relation to the wider institutional and structural contexts within which they function. From this perspective, the restructuring of the university system is perceived to be a necessary response to the wider political and socio-economic shifts associated with the inexorable developments of market economies and economic globalization (see Fairclough, 2000). Viewed against this background, if universities are to provide the appropriate goods and services for their respective clients and consumers in an efficient fashion, they can do little more than accommodate themselves to these new contexts by behaving even more like corporations and businesses. Such interpretations suggest that the phenomena under consideration are governed by causal laws, implying that the changes are akin to natural processes beyond social and political control. Not only does this partake of a subsumptive logic of explanation, in which a variety of effects in a number of different contexts are accounted for by means of robust causal statements, but there is little questioning of the supposed inevitability and over-powering force of socio-economic development itself, and little or no prospect for developing alternative conceptions of the university in liberal democratic societies.

While government officials and manager-academics have tended to advocate, implement, and accommodate themselves to higher education reforms, students and employee-academics have tended to be more sceptical about the benefits of these reforms. While the growing commercialization and consumerization of higher education (Willmott, 2003) has not been the central target of student protests, a related concern has: tuition fees and the prospect of long-term loan debts. The generally accepted view is that ordinary academics, for their part, have also tended to experience negatively the immediate consequences of the new regimes and practices on their identities, work practices and wages. Though this category of “ordinary

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Given no corresponding increases in funding, staff-student ratios reflected this trend: 1:9 in mid 1970s, to 1:17 in 1997, projected to be 1:23 in 2010. Association of University Teachers (AUT) surveys conducted amongst the profession in 1998 and 2004 show levels of stress in the academic profession at 70 per cent, something confirmed by in-depth interviews reporting numerous instances of “occupational stress, illness, alienation, fear and resentment” (AUT, 2004; Morley, 2005, 86).

academics" is by no means homogenous, one could say that they and their unions have focussed their critical gaze on the changing ways in which governments and senior managers have sought to control and dominate academic staff, in their endeavours to make them more productive, competitive and efficient.

In this general context, an apparent conundrum or puzzle has emerged concerning the lack of meaningful resistance by academics to the new regime of audit practices: in spite of the "increasingly vocal dissatisfaction" with the new regimes, there appears to be no effective and "publicly articulated" critique of audit rationality (Shore and Wright, 2000, 80). For purposes of illustrating our logics approach, then, we shall pick up and develop this problem into a problematization. The problem itself has often been posed in the following terms: Why have academics proved so compliant, even complicit, in accepting the changes they are experiencing, especially when they recognize them to be contingent and problematic? Some radical critics have explained the passive and complicitous response of academics by correlating changes in the academic labour process – the "intensification of tasks", deskilling, the loss of autonomy in the work process, and so on, all of which reduce job satisfaction – with their mute and ineffective complaints.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is sometimes argued that academics often collude in these practices of "coercive accountability" by reluctantly or willingly "policing... their colleagues and themselves" (Brenneis, Shore, and Wright, 2005, 8)<sup>8</sup> or by maintaining a "disgraceful silence on these matters" (Howie, 2005, 5–6).<sup>9</sup>

However, there is a problem with invoking the "force" of change, in conjunction with "passivity" or "lack of will power", as the key to accounting for the "audit revolution" in higher education. This is largely because it encourages one to over-emphasize the absence of effective resistance to the virtual exclusion of other types of response. In short, this interpretation presents an overly homogeneous picture that tends to reinforce the "causal law" paradigm, while smoothing over the "combined and uneven" effects and responses in the academic field.

7 Such commentators include Selway, McMurty, Bocock and Watson, Jary and Parker, among others (as noted by Trowler, 1998, 49, 54–5, 97–8, 101–2, 141–2).

8 As one lecturer in English literature put it: "I think it's extraordinary how quickly academics adjust to a situation which they've all been complaining about. I think we're very spineless in that regard. Or you could say adaptable but, you know, I feel that we accept more or less any kind of imposition that is made on us" (as cited in Morley, 2003, 52).

9 From a North American perspective too, "today's corporatized university – which would have been an unspeakable sacrilege for many less than a generation ago – is now being embraced with hardly any complaint or criticism by the faculty, students, or society at large" (Miyoshi, 2002, 52). As early as the 1980s, US researchers were suggesting that heads of departments were effectively colluding with the managerialist thrust towards a human capital approach to achieving higher education aims (Slaughter, 1985, 52), reporting "no identifiable resistance to this from academic staff themselves in any form, the only threat to managerial success being the fact that 'managers may be expecting the impossible, asking faculty for higher performance while providing fewer resources and reduced services' (1985, 54)" (Trowler, 1998, 50).



Another group of scholars has questioned this simple picture by focussing more closely on the full scope of academics' self-interpretations.<sup>10</sup> They suggest that passivity and ineffective resistance are not particularly accurate ways of characterizing the situation "on the ground". For a start, they do not reflect the ways in which academics have interpreted and used the reforms to their own advantage. In addition, they do not acknowledge the existence of resistance, nor the varied forms this may take. For example, Worthington and Hodgson sketch out a typology of resistance strategies or subject positions adopted by academics, classifying them as "devolvers", "shirkers", "ditherers", and "deceivers" (Worthington and Hodgson, 2005). Trowler, too, proposes a nuanced approach which acknowledges that policy implementation will meet with a range of academic responses: "with compliance (both enthusiastic and reluctant), with resistance, with coping strategies, and with attempts to reconstruct the policy during the implementation phase" (Trowler, 1998, 153), though it is worth pointing out that in her research, Morley found that "for every one informant who celebrates audit, there are at least ten who decry it" (Morley, 2005, 86).

These interpretations not only highlight the uneven and varied terrain of higher education, in which only about 50 per cent of academics are on permanent contracts, while the rest make do with fixed-term, part-time, or hourly-paid contracts, but they also caution against the monolithic compliance response hypotheses implied by "causal law" models relied upon by both enthusiasts and detractors of market and audit reforms. Importantly, they open up a research agenda that focuses on the diverse range of responses that do not comply with the new practices (see Prichard and Willmott, 1997, 292; Trowler, 1998; Worthington and Hodgson, 2005).

Contextualized self-interpretations are thus crucial in helping us to better refine and understand our problem. We are thus able to formulate the question in broader terms and our answers are not pre-empted. Why are higher education audit reforms frequently not abandoned or actively resisted by academics? Or, to put it in even stronger terms, why are these reforms often allowed to intensify further, becoming even more deeply institutionalized and sedimented in UK universities? Indeed, our problematization of existing problematizations can be reiterated and expressed in more Foucauldian terms. Why is it that academics have insisted with such vehemence that they are increasingly exploited and dominated by the new regime, and yet powerless and impotent to resist such changes?

Viewed from our logics perspective, we seek to connect this problematization to a range of related questions: How are we to characterize the new phenomena and practices? Where did this new regime of practices come from, and how and why has it been installed so rapidly? Where there is discontent amongst academics why does this rarely translate into effective political protest and resistance? How can we

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10 See Johnson, 2002; Morley, 2005; Prichard, 2000; Prichard and Willmott, 1997; Trowler, 1998, 2002.



account for the way in which these new discursive practices have managed to grip subjects, especially when they are opposed to them?

## 6 The Turn to Logics

For us answering these sorts of questions involves identifying the relevant social, political, and fantasmatic logics. We must thus start by *characterizing* the practices under investigation by identifying the assemblage of *social logics* that are being installed in UK universities. For purposes of illustration, we start by positing the operation of four such logics – competition, atomisation, hierarchy, and instrumentalization – which when articulated together enable us to characterize the emergent regime of audit practices.

To begin, we could say that the rules of many practices linked to the audit regime are governed by a *logic of competition*, which in our view captures the ways that actors interact with each other as rivals. They capture the way in which universities *qua* producers of knowledge and skill commodities compete to secure income from good students and from research councils and private companies; the way *students* compete to secure positions and scholarships in highly ranked universities; and the way *schools, departments, and individual academic staff* compete to maximize their share of university resources.<sup>11</sup> This logic of competition, which is of course central to market practices generally, has to be artificially triggered in contexts such as universities by means of audit techniques which make diverse products and services comparable.<sup>12</sup>

11 As one analyst puts it, “[a] major factor contributing to the fragmentation of the notion of a community of scholars is the ideology of competition. The competitive neutrality principle has exacted its toll by making academics compete with one another as though they are on a level playing field. However, this level playing field never exists in reality. Universities are differentiated by history, age, reputation, location, size, types of courses offered, and so on. Departments are equally differentiated by similar factors. And academics by their very location in certain departments, in certain universities, are almost never on an equal playing field. Yet, the notions that the market knows best and that competition brings greater efficiency and that the competition must be based on a neutral stage has meant that formulas that do not differentiate among various types of institutions, departments, or academics are used to set performance indicators and distribute resources. This competitive ethos pits one academic against another, one department against another, and one university against another. This leads to a game of individuals in the survival of the fittest that fragments the university [and subverts its purposes]” (Currie, 2004, 52–3).

12 The invocation of a logic of competition is able to capture the following sentiment expressed by Willmott: “Concepts such as ‘modernization’, ‘specialization’, ‘professionalization’, and, more recently, ‘rationalization’, ‘specialization’ are widely deployed to characterize the dynamics of organizational change in (higher) education. These concepts [qua discursive shifts] usefully highlight important aspects of current developments. But they do not directly identify or explore the coupling, which is becoming progressively tightened, between capitalist values and priorities, mediated by political ideologies and programs, and the organization and control of academic labour” (Willmott, 1995, 994). A set of criteria are deployed to render the units of produc-

It is clear that the social logics of competition interact with other social logics in the context of new public management, marketization, and commodification discourses. For example, *logics of atomisation* could be said to describe patterns of discursive articulation that individuate institutions and persons as independent entities, thus isolating them from each other, while abstracting from them their virtues, skills, and other attributes. They operate in such a way as to downplay the social or structural aspect of success and failure in the self-understanding of persons and institutions, leaving them to view themselves as individually responsible for their successes and failures. *Logics of hierarchy* embrace a range of top-down modes of governance, including some forms of collegial governance structures. Here, they describe the way universities are increasingly understood by academics to be governed in the way that firms are governed, namely, by chief executives who have Hobbesian-like authority to make snap decisions and thus respond quickly and firmly to external audit demands and (global) market trends, seeking out entrepreneurial advantage wherever possible (Robins and Webster, 2002, 13; Wright, 2004, 84). Finally, we could add *logics of instrumentalization*, which operate in such a way as to downplay the potentially intrinsic and processual qualities of teaching and research in favour of their instrumental or exchange value, whether from the point of view of academics or students (Howie, 2005, 4; Willmott, 1995, 1021).

We can thus pinpoint four possible social logics informing the practices of the new regime. The underlying drive of the logics of competition is to render all things commensurable and comparable, which in turn tends to feed and reinforce logics of atomisation and hierarchical governance, as well as processes of instrumentalization, in which academic activities are converted into commodities whose quality – via the various audit regimes – can be ascertained and enhanced numerically. The important point to keep in mind here is how, for us, the identification and operation of social logics requires some reference to – or passage through – the self-interpretations of subjects. Nevertheless, having gone some way to establishing *what* the logics structuring the various audit practices in higher education are, we can also ask *why* and *how* they came about and continue to be sustained. This turns our attention to the operation of political and fantasmatic logics.

## 6.1 Political and Fantasmatic Logics

In order to account for the installation and grip of the audit practices in UK universities – the logic of its emergence and radical institution, and the way in which it recruits, grips and governs subjects – we have to consider the problem at both

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tion commensurate with one another, which is precisely what the audit systems have helped to bring about in the higher education sector. Since university degrees and academic publications lack many of the usual features we associate with typical goods and services in a market – their frequently repeated sale and purchase which establishes, through an “invisible hand”, a fairly reliable price-quality correlation – teaching and research audits help to simulate a market in the higher education sector by furnishing it with the conditions to establish such links.

the “macro” and “micro” levels, even though we accept that this distinction is not ontological, but pragmatic or “technological” (Rose, 1999, 5–6). The macro-micro contrast is connected to our distinction between regimes and practices, though the precise elements of these contrasts depends on the problem being investigated. For heuristic purposes, then, let us fix the notion of regime here at the level of the state government and audit practices at the level of the university. This suggests that we focus our analysis both on the role of the New Right project in challenging and restructuring the crisis-ridden post-war consensus in the 1970s and 1980s, in which the universities were but one element in an overall hegemonic project designed to install a new political settlement, *and* on the micro-dynamics by which these new ideas and practices were installed in the universities themselves.

Obviously, in this limited illustration, we cannot provide a comprehensive account of these complex processes. Nonetheless, we can suggest ways in which an analysis of regimes at different levels reveals how political logics of equivalence were mobilized to shift the terrain away from the post-war consensus. In the context of a deepening crisis and dislocation, New Right politicians, ideologues and activists during the 1970s sought to link together a range of diverse demands into a project that publicly contested the failing Keynesian welfare state project, which had been installed in the UK after the Second World War. They did so in the name of a project that welded together the demands for a “free economy”, a “strong state” and traditional morality in a radical new mix (Gamble, 1994). As many analysts have shown, this involved a form of populist politics that successfully divided the existing “one nation” welfare state consensus into two camps, pitting those in favour of the newly proposed project against those associated with the post-war consensus (Gamble, 1994; Hall, 1983, 1988; Jessop et al., 1988; King, 1987; Smith, 1994).

Amongst the many institutions and groups that were made equivalent, and then targeted, by this new project – public sector workers, trade unions, teachers, doctors, lawyers, immigrants and gays, and so forth – it is not surprising that universities, academics and state-subsidized students also came under fire. Indeed Thatcher’s higher education reforms began in dramatic fashion in 1981, less than two years after her election, when funding to universities was cut by an average of 17 per cent, pitching annual increases thereafter at below inflation rates. But it was the 1985 Jarratt Report that explicitly re-envisioned universities in the mould of corporations competing in a higher education market and requiring much tighter management structures (Jarratt, 1985; Wright, 2004, 84; Shore and Wright, 2000, 67). From then on, “Vice Chancellors were re-baptized as ‘chief executives’, departments became ‘cost centres’, and university administrators became ‘managers’” of educational providers (Shore and Wright 2000: 104). Subsequent Reports have reinforced this view, praising what advances were made, and calling for still further reform (e.g., the Dearing Report (1997) and the Lambert Report (2003)) (Wright, 2004).

In this incipient discourse, academics and universities were easily targeted as an outmoded and inefficient obstacle to realizing the ideals of market competition, lower public spending, and greater consumer accountability. For example, in the period preceding the new legislation, Mrs Thatcher slyly summed up her antipathy to the universities in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* by asking: “Why is it that a lot of the people who want to build up a business never get to university, don’t want to go to university, but will employ a lot of university people?” (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 1984 cited in Young, 1989, 414). It is not difficult to discern the logic of fantasy at work in her discourse in these and similar representations of universities and academics. The latter are unfavourably compared with hard-working, self-made “men” who do not require a university education to succeed in the competitive world of business and industry. By contrast, lecturers and students are often portrayed as “privileged”, “lazy”, “inefficient”, “sexually corrupting”, “morally deviant”, and so forth.<sup>13</sup> What is important to highlight here is that for something to function fantasmatically – the image of the lazy or free-riding academic or, somewhat contradictorily, the academic who industriously sets out to “milk the system” – it needs to come to embody the general public’s view, or at least the relevant audience’s view, of the *typical* academic, especially if this is officially denied when individuals are confronted with the “facts”, or indeed even if – as no doubt is the case – there are some academics who “in fact” conform to this image.

13 From this point of view, one would also need to focus on the fantasmatic narratives that resist public official disclosure. Indeed, it is critical to note that a range of cultural preconditions were set in place during the 1970s and 1980s, as funding cuts were instituted and new business management discourses were introduced. For example, taking their cue in part from the successful broadcast of Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* in 1957, these preconditions were installed through the televised serialization of Frederick Raphael’s *Glittering Prizes* in 1976, Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man*, both in 1981, Andrew Davies’ *A Very Peculiar Practice* in 1986–88, Tom Sharpe’s *Porterhouse Blue* in 1987, and David Lodge’s *Nice Work* in 1989. Though based on novels written in and reflecting different periods in the development of the university, they all painted a picture of academic life, with respect to both lecturer and student, that was in its different ways privileged and decadent, out-of-touch, cliquey, vindictive, petty, overly bureaucratic, wasteful, corrupt, revolutionary, and so on.

In fact, one could argue that these views have persisted in the wake of the initial Thatcher attacks on the universities, and they surface at moments when the universities come into public view. For instance, in the 2006 AUT strike, the lazy and inefficient lecturer re-emerged as a figure of fantasmatic representation. Here are some typical expressions:

*Travelling the world to attend conferences? It’s a hard life. My friend, who is an academic, goes on several of these a year. She happily admits that they are great fun, that she picks the best places to go to, that they rarely do more than a couple of days’ work and spend the rest of the time shopping, lounging on the beach and drinking cocktails. All this (apart from the alcohol) is paid for on top of their salary and normal holiday. She often gives papers that are simply adapted from articles she has already written... There are quite a lot of people who get paid quite a lot less to do similar or longer hours, and with fewer cocktails.* (Guardian Unlimited, 2006: March 7, 11:02am)

Or again: *[L]ecturers have a hard life. Salaries of up to 50k, long hols, contracts with no fixed hours (check out the acres of empty space in the car park on a Friday afternoon) and with as little as 10 hours contact time.* (Guardian Unlimited, 2006: March 7, 01:39pm)

The lighter and darker sides of these sentiments are reflected in more recent novelistic representations: Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* and the anonymously written *Campus Conspiracy*.

The function of these fantasies is to organize a subject's own mode of enjoyment by imagining how academics enjoy themselves, usually at its expense.

From our perspective, political and fantasmatic logics help us to furnish an account of how and why the institutionalization of audit practices became a goal at state level. They do this because they make visible and enable us to construct a narrative that typically comprises a threat, an obstacle, and the formulation of the problem which sets the terms of debate, and the range of possible policy solutions (see Levidow, 2002, 234). In the case of the universities in this context, academics and students were often named as an obstacle to the goals of economic competitiveness, efficient public spending, and consumer accountability. They were thus ripe for neo-liberal "solutions" requiring the implementation of market competition, greater transparency, and consumer accountability.

In sum, then, the recent university reforms make sense against the background of a Thatcher legacy of civil service and public sector reforms, which sought to reduce public expenditure by introducing simulated market environments that were structured around centrally managed targets (via the creation of the National Audit Office in 1983). And in this new regime public servants and individuals generally would compete with one another to cut through bureaucratic inefficiencies. As far as higher education was concerned, it was clear that the Thatcher government considered universities to have failed the economy (DES, 1987; Kogan and Kogan, 1983: Chs 1 & 8; Shore and Wright, 2000, 67). Moreover, higher education reforms were not halted in the Major and Blair years. In fact one could argue that they have been accelerated by the post-Thatcher Conservative Party and New Labour, who have both striven to implement and even extend many aspects of the New Right programme. The main architects of New Labour appear to be still very much in the thrall of a fantasy in which the market functions as a kind of panacea, promising to solve all problems through increased competition, greater choice and consumer responsiveness (see Wright, 2004).

If we turn now to discern the logics through which audit practices were instituted at the level of universities, we can point to the various ways in which many senior university administrators and a new cadre of "manager academics" embraced them. Though they would often seek to ease the impact upon their staff, such reforms were clearly compatible with the prospects of restructuring their institutions and advancing their careers. In a similar way, the new audit practices offered avenues for some "ordinary academics" to advance their careers. But, overall, the responses have been multiple and uneven. For example, there have been instances of resistance, where some of the more extreme elements of the new programmes were contested. One such instance of overt resistance took place in 1988 when the AUT successfully challenged vice-chancellors' attempt to link targets with appraisal for differential pay and promotions (Pollitt, 1993, 80). Similarly, while the security of tenure was lost in the 1988 *Education Reform Act*, the profession successfully lobbied for "the



insertion of a formal statement of academic freedom” (Shore and Wright, 2000, 68). Of direct relevance to the attempt to install audit practices was the successful revolt against the QAA in March 2001 led by the LSE, and followed closely by UCL, Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Birmingham, who threatened to set up their own separate quality assurance schemes (Bruneau and Savage, 2002, 109–114; see also Apple, 2003). And yet, these acts of resistance are perhaps better understood as battles won in a losing war. Moreover, they have been largely conducted from above, whether by the higher-ranked managers in select universities or by the leaders of the then AUT and/or NATFE, without the active support of ordinary academics. At issue here, then, is the extent to which these public contestations and political demands are either radical or hegemonic, and we suspect that in the eyes of many they are neither.

In the main one could argue that universities have complied with the structures of the new audit and market practices in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the new elites identified with the idea that UK universities needed to compete in an increasingly competitive global market, and that closer links with business and industry, the charging of student fees, and the demands for greater productivity were “necessary evils” in the survival and expansion of UK universities. They have also employed a variety of means to implement higher education reforms generally and install audit practices specifically. Of course, greater ethnographic specificity is required to explore the precise logics through which these practices were installed in different institutions, as well as their considerable impact on the structure and function of these institutions. Nevertheless, it is apparent that audit practices have already been deployed to justify the closing down of “failing departments”, to pressurize academic staff to “publish or perish”, and/or to raise greater research funds and recruit more students. “Modernizers” have constructed a series of antagonistic equivalences in order to establish political frontiers that make possible the installation of the new practices. Thus we have seen the ideological construction of “surplus” versus “deficit” departments, “research active” versus “research inactive” members of staff, “good recruiters” versus “bad recruiters”, “traditional” versus “innovative” modes of service provision, and so forth. On the other hand, and at the same time, university managers and administrators have – by means of various logics of difference – sought to manage change by addressing demands and by changing the structures of governance, so as to prevent or displace public contestation. This active production of manageable difference leads us directly to our final set of questions.

What, then, about the reproduction and maintenance of this new complex of practices in the face of apparent discontent? Why so little effective political resistance? There are a number of factors that can help us to address these questions without reducing their answers to a function of the “lawlike force” of the changes or the lack of will power (“passivity”) on the part of “ordinary academics”. This, of course, is not to deny that reforms have in many cases been imposed on academics



and students through pressure, coercion and enforced compliance. Putting pressure on “failing” academics, or even entire departments, schools or universities, to meet required targets or face the prospect of “early retirement”, closure or “restructuring”, has certainly ensured a measure of compliance. Equally, academics face the perennial problem that arises from the “logic of collective action”, in which the individual’s costs of collective action are often perceived to outweigh her potential benefits. This means that sporadic student protests and occasional strike actions by lecturers for better wages and conditions are frequently seen as the only possible means of protest, and even these actions are often unevenly supported and carried out.

But as we have suggested these elements of an explanation acquire sense and significance against the backdrop of the social logics of competition, atomization, hierarchy, and instrumentalization. And these, in turn, are integrally connected to the installation of the new audit practices in which they are operative, especially the way these new social practices and logics render significant numbers of academics complicit with their dominating aspects. For instance, we can hypothesize that the grip of these social logics is linked to the fact that they resonate strongly with relations of rivalry and the fantasmatic logic that underpins the latter. From this point of view, the social logic of competition, along with its commensurating preconditions, draws upon and is sustained by an underlying logic of fantasy, which it would be the task of detailed and subtle ethnographic research to shed light on. What sorts of market fantasies and modes of enjoyment – whether beatific ones of success or horrific ones of victimization – are operative in the university audit context?

It is also the case that the fantasies of rivalry, of “winning” the various competitions and successfully “passing” various institutional tests, strongly resonate with the broader social context in which they operate. In other words, given a wider discursive context in which a culture of instrumentalist consumption and exchange dominates, it is not fanciful to suppose that key signifiers which exhibit a clearly positive valence for subjects, whether they are “quality”, “professionalism”, “knowledge”, “excellence” or “freedom”, should be suitably rearticulated to better resonate with the market ethos (see Mautner, 2005, 100; Readings, 1996). “Quality” and “knowledge” are thus no longer presented as different, antithetical, or simply autonomous in this new discourse from consumer ideals or the market ethos. Given a dislocation, and the drawing of a political frontier via logics of equivalence, key terms acquire the status of “floating signifiers” – signifiers that for relevant subjects are no longer fixed to a particular meaning. Once detached, they begin to “float”, and their identity is only (partially) stabilized when they are successfully hegemonized by groups that endeavour to naturalize meaning in one way rather than another.

It is not surprising, then, that academics often bear an ambivalent and complicated relation to such reforms, especially when they are closely associated with the ideals of greater transparency and accountability, giving rise to feelings of guilt and shame if they are opposed or transgressed. And this in turn acts as a “restraint”

on their impulse to protest. But the context surrounding the introduction of the higher education reforms in the UK is also relevant in understanding this ambivalence, for there is evidence that the Thatcher government succeeded in drawing a political frontier that enabled it to drive through the reforms. By criticizing universities for failing the economy throughout the 1980s, accusing academics of being snobbishly out of touch with the real world, and by painting a general picture of higher education as overly bureaucratic and inefficient in the face of an imminent and threateningly aggressive global market, “modernizers” facilitate the process by which certain key signifiers are detached from their signifieds and rearticulated to reinforce market-friendly equivalences.

## 6.2 Critique

In order to illustrate and elaborate the critical aspect of our logic of explanation, let us stay with the case of UK higher education. Let us consider, for example, the logic of atomization with which we captured and contextualized the atomizing patterns of audit practices, at least as they manifest themselves through the self-interpretations of academics and students. In other words, let us start by assuming that lecturers and students *do* tend to see themselves predominantly as sellers of labour or purchasers of products, in which the value of their skills and talents is taken to be a product of their individual efforts and virtues. We assume, here, that this social logic constitutes a dominant and dominating norm that is worthy of public contestation. To say that this logic is dominant, however, does not mean that there are no academics and students who understand themselves and their skills differently, and there are certainly academics and students who are capable of envisioning themselves differently.

In this situation, a counter-logic of a *plural and democratic community* can be projected into our objects of study in order to serve as a critical counter-point to the belief that the logic of atomization is necessary and inevitable. With this logic we can gather together those (latent and manifest) discursive patterns that in the self-interpretations of actors tend to situate their institutions, themselves, and their attributes in a wider social context. We can also point to the strongly felt need amongst many academics to be consulted about the ongoing changes, which stands in contrast to those social logics which function to abstract or bracket them from wider decision-making structures. And we can affirm the idea of a heterogeneous set of research and teaching practices that ought not to be homogenized in the name of one model of a university. In other words, while counter-logics of a plural and democratic community are construed loosely and abstractly, prescribing in this sense only a minimal normative content, they can still point to a contextualizing and democratic impulse in the self-understanding of actors themselves. The aim is thus to articulate such a counter-logic out of “[d]ifferences, resistances, and protean energies [which] flow through the ‘perpetual gaps’ within and between social

formations, opening up possibilities for the politics of pluralization" (Connolly, 1995, 39). There are, in other words, discursive resources available to people, even if only in protean form, to articulate their varied experiences of dislocation in an alternative normative direction. Thus, for example, if it is accepted that in the particular context of UK higher education reforms, the social logic of atomisation tends to provide fertile ground for the operation of the social logic of competition, and because the more social totalities are broken down into atoms the more scope there is for the logic of competition to take hold, then the counter-logic of a plural and democratic community can have the effect of weakening or contesting it, or at least making it visible.

This highlights the ineliminable connection between analysis and critique in our approach. The very naming of a social logic already involves critical judgement. First, as we explained above, it serves to gather together what is ultimately a heterogeneous field of elements that have no "objective" or "necessary" connections. Second, this process of naming enables us to conjure alternative names and accompanying socio-political visions, if only because the significance of atomization in this context derives from those names and reaggregations to which it can be opposed.

Counter-logics of a plural and democratic community can thus oppose and problematize those discursive articulations in which the logics of atomization predominate. Take, for example, Wilmott's claim that "skills possessed by sellers of labour, such as academics, are not sensibly theorized as individual capacities that provide their sellers with leverage in the labour market." Instead, a counter-logic can be used to understand skills in a non-atomistic way. In this view, skills would be seen as "supported by the way that work is organized in society. It is this organization of work that is productive of, and promotes the attribution of value to, certain skills" (Wilmott, 1995, 997–8, drawing on Johnson, 1980). In other words, when considering the valuation or devaluation of skills, this pattern of self-understanding places great importance on its social and collective character by making visible a broader politico-economic context. As Trowler puts it, "seeing knowledge and skill as socially distributed within a community of practice alerts us to one of the problems with the notion of 'key skills' and the idea that we should 'fill' our students with as many and as much of them as possible. This individualistic [or atomistic] way of thinking about knowledge and skill shows the error of attributing to the individual what is in fact a social characteristic" (Trowler, 2001, 195–6).

If put together, a view that stresses the values of plurality, community and democracy can provide grounds for reflecting critically about inequality which is conceived primarily in terms of individual choice or capacity. For instance, while a Weberian approach might conceive inequality "in terms of the capacity of individuals to acquire skills and act collectively to create monopolies and scarcities", a Marxian approach might understand inequality as a function of class domination in capitalist societies, "in the sense that those who derive an income from capital are obliged to

adapt and respond to systemic pressures to commodify their labour as they compete with other sellers of labour to secure the means of subsistence” (Willmott, 1995, 997–8). However, it should be stressed that it is only through hegemonic struggle that the adoption of an alternative conception of inequality – say as a function of socio-structural domination – is possible.

We recall that we also identified social logics of hierarchy as capturing those discursive patterns which in the self-interpretations of actors reinforce a specific managerial form of top-down governance. They are logics which are not simply reflected in university governing structures themselves, but also in university-related decision-making structures, such as RAE and TQA panels. For some commentators, of course, these managerialist logics of hierarchy tend to reinforce and exacerbate existing hierarchies of seniority and gender, but this need not be the case. Here again, however, the critical counter-logic of a plural and democratic community suggests that progressive change cannot come about by individual action alone. The problem in this regard is that more and more features of our social lives appear to be excluded from collective control, and academia is not exempt from these processes. Elite managerial technocrats increasingly make important decisions affecting universities, mostly in response to new government targets and/or consumer trends, without tracking the interests of their stakeholders sufficiently – especially their employees and students – through processes of deliberation or even consultation.

In emphasizing the more plural, collective, and democratic dimensions of social life, we can also make visible the different ways in which the logic of competition is articulated with the social logic of atomization, and we can foreground the contingency of the managerialist logic of hierarchy that increasingly structures university organizations. Counter-logics of democracy and non-domination thus become viable and normatively attractive options in this context. Even so, we should note that counter-logics are not pure projections, since they are also immanent – i.e., they exist in incipient form – in the self-interpretations of academics, who often complain about the lack of consultation, or the lack of time to make meaningful contributions in the various consultation exercises. These normative options can then receive support and backing by opening them up to existing normative theories of pluralism, democracy and justice.

In concluding this section, it is worth emphasizing the point that in *naming* dominant social logics and counter-logics, we engage in a task of rhetorical redescription that foregrounds the contingent and political character of social practices. It does not follow, of course, that objectivity is substituted by a kind of subjectivism in which the analyst’s individual preferences become foundational. It only follows that the political analyst is already engaged in a hegemonic struggle, deploying political logics of rhetorical redescription in the very process of characterizing and explaining discursive practices. This is what is at stake in identifying and emphasizing one social logic rather than another. That is to say, it involves the linking together of

certain discursive features in equivalential chains, thereby making them part of one rather than another logic. This is precisely what we have done in specifying the nature of social logics and counter-logics.

When we turn to political logics it is thus important to emphasize their *double* operation, for these are not only *explicitly* invoked to render intelligible the discursive and political shifts in a particular case, but are also *implicitly* invoked by the analyst herself in the very process of characterizing features of a practice as belonging to one social logic rather than another. To miss this double invocation of political logics is to risk misconstruing the characterizing exercise as “natural” or “value neutral”, thus suppressing the normative dimension of critical explanation. As Morley puts it, the “terms that are used to describe organizational life in the academy are also [the] active forces shaping it” (Morley, 2003, ix), thus highlighting the danger that emerges when specific theoretical approaches do not think critically about the fact that they may share the assumptions that are meant to underpin the practices being studied (e.g., classical economics in the case of market practices). From this point of view, markets, much less than audits and democratic forms of life, are not simply “neutral” entities which can be put to either good or bad uses. Their very apprehension and analysis requires ongoing characterizing *and* evaluative judgements on the part of the analyst, to adapt Ernest Nagel’s terms (Nagel, 1961, 492). Repressing this double-invocation is akin to denying the role of the analyst’s subjectivity, and to be complicit with the way mainstream political scientists strive to avoid the political nature of their own analyses.

All this suggests that the construction of a counter-logic demands that normative and sociological resources be explicitly brought to bear. But this analysis already hints at how we may add a further critical vantage point to the normative one described thus far. For we can consider the degree to which the social logics of competition, atomization, hierarchy, and instrumentalization, feed into or reinforce certain fantasies – fantasies of control for example. And these in turn open up a new, though related critical vista. How might specific counter-logics, such as those of a plural and democratic community interrupt or destabilize these fantasies, ushering forth a space for hegemonic struggles informed by a radical democratic ethos?

## 7 Conclusion

The general question animating our illustration and to which our assemblage of logics and their underlying theoretical framework was addressed concerned the rapid transformation in UK higher education systems of control. This involved a transition from collegial to managerial forms of governance, entailing the introduction of a series of audit regimes. After problematizing the “passivity” thesis as a popular response to the more specific question of why there has been a relative absence of overt and effective contestation on the part of many academics who are subjected to such reforms, we attempted to construct a set of explanatory hypotheses in the



form of an illustrative “explanatory sketch” by articulating together different kinds of logics.

In accounting for the installation of various audit practices in universities, we first had recourse to an analysis pitched at the level of the state regime, showing how they formed one element in a wider New Right project initiated by the Thatcher government. All we would like to do here is to highlight several aspects of our critical explanation concerning the apparent lack of significant and effective resistance to audit reforms, as a way of illustrating the role that logics can play in generating explanations. We can start with the social logic of atomisation which, as we have seen, can reinforce the idea of individual responsibility and fault for the fallout of audit practices. One significant implication of this pattern of discursive articulations, at least as they are taken up in the self-interpretations of academics, is that the very recourse to complaint is rendered less likely. In other words, self-attribution of fault can function to pre-empt the emergence of complaints in the first place.

Yet even where such complaints do emerge, the forums and structures for constructing and expressing them are weak. Here the various logics of hierarchy are important in understanding and explaining why one might stop short of public contestation, whether these logics are operative in academics’ place of work or their unions. Once the logic of atomisation is made visible, by hitching one’s wagon to some form of democratic community as a counter-logic for example, it becomes more likely that issues of governance will be foregrounded, thereby politicizing hierarchical tendencies. This is because, if fault is not locatable in the individual, but is seen instead to reside primarily in wider structures, the question of how we do and should shape those wider structures will tend to be addressed more directly: Should the balance fall more on the side of hierarchical and elitist forms of governance, or more plural and democratic forms? If the latter, what precise content should the counter-logics of a plural and democratic community take? For example, should they tend toward a republican ideal, a radical democratic ideal, or some other ideal?<sup>14</sup>

But even where powerful democratic counter-discourses are available, there may yet be a tendency to shy away from overt contestation for a number of reasons. For example, academics may feel that the purposes of universities are changing, especially under the influence of wider consumption discourses in which the logic of instrumentalisation is prominent.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the social logic of competition, and the relations of rivalry which it encourages and with which it resonates, appear to be making life difficult for those who resist their underlying commensurability drives. From their point of view, commensurability and comparability imperatives generate anti-pluralist tendencies, thus marginalizing and excluding practices, espe-

14 See, for example: Pettit, 1997, 2001; Mouffe, 2000; Norval, 2007; Connolly, 2005.

15 A *prima facie* more bizarre possibility might be that there is an enjoyment involved in the very act of complaining, an enjoyment which would be removed if demands were immediately granted. This idea has been elaborated elsewhere in terms of a logic of self-transgressive enjoyment (Glynos, 2003, 2008).



cially practices which privilege the qualitative dimension in research and teaching. From this perspective, the status and nature of the social sciences and humanities have undergone (and are still undergoing) fairly dramatic changes.

In this story, of course, political and fantasmatic logics are invoked to highlight how various social logics have become operative in higher education discourse both at the state level and at the level of the university. For instance, the political logics of equivalence and difference can and have been deployed to draw frontiers between modernizers and traditionalists, and to emphasize the similarities between consumer and higher education discourses. But fantasies of control and victimization are also important in enriching our overall account, by offering reasons why it may be difficult to destabilize established social logics. Once this assemblage of logics has managed to sediment itself firmly in the academic arena, it requires complex counter-hegemonic work – notwithstanding a major dislocatory event – to experience something different and thus offer some sort of bulwark against what appears to many as an inevitable and natural anti-pluralizing trend.

As we saw earlier, our analysis attributes a certain centrality to the social logic of competition and the relations of rivalry which underpin it. One implication of this is to sound a cautionary note as regards progressive demands, such as demands for equitable wages for university staff, which are justified on the basis that they will ensure universities remain competitive or even enhance their competitiveness. That is to say, it suggests we pause before accepting competition as a fundamental and unproblematic ideal or principle of governance. But another implication is more exploratory in nature. It suggests we investigate in more detail the different ways a social logic of competition can get fleshed out in practice. Are some forms of competition in certain contexts more benign – even desirable? After all, as some have noted (e.g., Evans, 2004, 119, 137), academics have always tended to work competitively and in relative isolation from each other. In addition, what sorts of counter-logics can be counter-posed to competition? One way of doing this, of course, would be to proceed by means of counterfactuals. The idea here would be to identify practices that have been marginalized by, or which even actively resist, those for which the logic of competition is central, and then try to discern not only the conditions making them possible, but also subjects' relations to the fantasies underpinning these practices. This, in turn, may help us to better conceptualize notions of "resistance", and even generate context-sensitive criteria of cooptation.

To conclude, we could say that our conception of logic is designed to capture the point, rules and ontological preconditions of a practice or regime of practices. More fully, the discernment of *social logics* enables us to characterize practices or regimes by setting out the rules and self-interpretations informing the practice; *political logics* allow us to account for their historical emergence and formation by focusing on the conflicts and contestations surrounding their constitution; and *fantasmatic logics* furnish us with the means to explain the way subjects are gripped

by a practice or regime of practices. Taken together, logics and counter-logics are by no means reducible to the empirical phenomena for which they are designed to account. But nor are they accorded a fully transcendental role and function that stand completely outside the problematized empirical phenomena. Instead, they must be articulated together, in relation to the empirical circumstances within which they are embedded, so as to produce a licit explanation. In so doing, they constitute logics of critical explanation.

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