

COMMENT

Audit culture and anthropology

Shore and Wright's (1999) article on the rise of 'audit' in higher education has provoked a series of comments in this journal but surprisingly little debate. Their thesis sets forth the view that audit culture can be addressed critically by understanding it as a form of neo-liberal governmentality and, in this, they draw heavily on Foucault. The commentaries that have appeared here have made the point that their analysis goes too far and is 'draining' (Mills 2000: 521) or 'pessimistic' (Richardson 2001: 721). I would like to add some complication by questioning the scope and theoretical basis of their approach and, conversely, suggest that they have not gone far enough. I am convinced that the changing nature of higher education is a matter of concern for anthropologists everywhere, but I remain unconvinced by their argument and consequently the ways they suggest to move forward.

Ireland has had a particular and 'localized' experience of quality audits, softened to a degree, no doubt, by the apparent problems noted in neighbouring higher education systems. Being intimate with the quality improvement system here – note the change of language, with the associated presumption that third-level education already has quality – I have had the opportunity to reflect on Shore and Wright's 'audit culture'. Their argument is underscored by two assumptions: first, that such a thing called 'audit culture' constitutes the appropriate object of enquiry; and, secondly, that it is assessed suitably via Foucault's framework. Both of these assumptions can be challenged and, interestingly, the first can be challenged by re-theorizing the second.

Foucault wrote a good deal about education. In fact, much of the argument in, for example, *Discipline and punish* is predicated on a sophisticated notion of power/body relationships in education contexts. Foucault's

work is, however, historical in the sense that he focuses on the transition to modern discipline, which reaches its height at the onset of the twentieth century. Though Foucault signposts the transition to the contemporary situation, he is notoriously elusive on our present era, speaking in general terms only about the spread of what he calls 'panopticism' – aside from isolated examples outside of his main *oeuvre*. Take, for example, his thinking on rank. Foucault suggests that a key aspect of disciplinary society is training, where individuals are ordered in terms of rank, constituting a 'single great table, with many different entries' (1977: 146–7). The order of education was related to the other great institutions of modernity, such as the family, army, factory floor, hospital, or even prison. One of the ways in which our era is marked as separate from that assessed by Foucault is the decline or transformation of such institutions. Rank, in what were usually enclosed spaces, has given way to a less obvious system of self-deforming contexts, famously described by Deleuze (1997: 309–10 *passim*) as 'modulations'. The education system is at the heart of this, with perpetual training and life-long learning replacing the old system, and corporate notions of human capital infesting all.

With this in mind, it seems as if what Shore and Wright are charting in British higher education is the micro manifestations of an *epistemic* shift. If this is the case – they seem to believe it is an 'epochal change' (2000: 57) – then there are three major questions. (1) Is there not a danger in being overly reliant on a theoretical framework that addresses a different era? Foucault developed a whole set of techniques for understanding the nature of the disciplinary society, particularly in his later work, but it is entirely reasonable to suggest that society is now a thing of the past. (2) Is the focus on higher education too narrow in its scope, running the risk of all small-scale studies? Mills (2000) makes this point in his comment when he notes that the changes in higher education cannot have been

unexpected and are easily linked with broader transformations. (3) If (2) is accepted, is there the consequent risk that audit culture is some sort of imaginative bogeyman standing in the place of an enquiry, perhaps comparative, into the nature of contemporary society?

Mass higher education has had profound consequences for the manner in which knowledge is disseminated and organized. The rate of third-level expansion has been astounding in the last few decades, a trend that has been one of the key driving-forces behind the concept of quality assessment. Students are now regarded as mobile choice-makers pursuing a rational, value-for-money policy, and the 'client-centred' approach is no longer the exception. Education institutions must compete with other 'providers' to capture this nomadic species of consumer. Perhaps the greatest flaw in the theorization of this process has been the persistent attempt to see it purely in terms of a work in progress. This is not a crisis. As Smith (1995: 1) reminds us, the new order has arrived with patterns of power that demand explanation. Shore and Wright (1999), together with Strathern (2000), have made a significant first step in assessing what is an issue of concern to anthropologists, professionally, and to many of the people and communities we study 'at home'.

However, caution is needed, as their work is suggesting modes of response to audit procedures. They suggest a policy of non-compliance with the audit culture. Before the armies of resistance are mobilized, I would like a clearer view of the supposed enemy. I would also like to know that those on my side have a clear understanding of the issues at hand. It is not enough to notice the proliferation of pronouncements using the term 'audit' and then seek to understand this by employing a theorist famed for moving beyond pronouncements, behaviours, and representations to look for the conditions that make those possible.

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Reply to Maguire

Maguire says that we make a 'significant first step' in examining the 'new order' of contemporary society and the new patterns of power that demand explanation, but claims we have merely noticed a proliferation of pronouncements using the term 'audit' and simply drawn on Foucault (famed for moving beyond pronouncements and representations) to look for the conditions that make these possible. This, he says, is not enough. Maguire promises to re-theorize Foucault's framework, but he falls short of this, and gives no indication how he would improve on what we have done.

We are not 'raw Foucauldians' as Maguire implies. Rather, our analysis contributes to the growing body of literature by anthropologists, sociologists, social theorists, and philosophers that explores the transition from the modern forms of power that Foucault analysed to neo-liberal forms of governance. Like others, we seek to explore how neo-liberal governance relies on individual agency, and how individuals, as active subjects, are co-opted into regimes of power. This makes us re-examine Foucault's notions of discourse and power to explore the space for agency and, drawing on the work of Gramsci, contestation. Perhaps more than some, we emphasize how neo-liberal governance is associated with changes

in capitalism, not least the new international knowledge economy. In short, we do not conceptualize power as an agentless process so diffuse that resistance is futile (a criticism sometimes levelled at Foucault). The aim of political anthropology is to 'unmask' the ways power is disguised and the techniques by which it operates.

We agree that the world has moved on since Foucault died, and we (1997) have explored the transformation from Foucault's disciplined society to neo-liberal forms of governance. Here, the institutions that patrol the norms of society and contain those who step outside them still exist, but in the 'normal' centre, order is created and maintained more by normalizing grids and technologies of the 'self'. By this we mean the myriad ways that individuals adopt new norms of conduct and internalize forms of discipline as part of their own sense of self.

We disagree with Maguire's claims that our focus on higher education is too narrow and small scale, or that the university sector is an 'imaginative bogeyman'. Politicians like Blair argue that mass higher education is the key to producing the kind of workforce that Britain needs if it is to capture a major share of the highly mobile and competitive international knowledge economy. To achieve mass higher education at reduced unit cost, and to make education more receptive to market forces, government considers that higher education itself must be transformed. Lecturers in particular must be subjected to the disciplines of new public management and its key technology, audit.

We suggest that audit procedures are designed to act on lecturers' constitution of themselves, to change their notions of professionalism and conduct, so that they contribute, not necessarily knowingly, to the government's emerging model for higher education, structured around the neo-liberal values of economy, efficiency, and value for money. Both Conservative and Labour governments have used audit technologies geared to assessing and enhancing 'quality' to transform the public sector in Britain. The result is that behind the rhetoric of 'TQM', 'empowerment', and 'responsibilization' lies an ever-more intrusive system of bureaucratic control, one that thrives on institutional competitiveness and enforced accountability.

Maguire advises caution in our responses to audit procedures. Studies of other parts of the public and private sector show three main

ways that staff have responded to audit technologies. First, some have maintained a difference between what they actually do, in keeping with their own professionalism, and what they are required to record for audit purposes. However, as many professionals (for example, social workers) have found, auditing procedures can be so intrusive that it is too exhausting to sustain this dual approach in the long term. By contrast, higher education still has the freedom to exploit the difference between 'what we do' and 'what we say we do', but do anthropologists discuss what they are 'trying to do' – the values of their own professionalism – in the first place? Secondly, in some professions, some senior members have been co-opted into managerial or policing roles and others have contested this, to the extent that professions have split (Exworthy & Halford 1999). The politics of peer review have not been discussed publicly in anthropology, and where there have been problems these tend to have been treated as 'little local difficulties'. Thirdly, there is the potential for regulatory capture. By this we mean a thorough examination of the terms by which the regulators operate (such as 'quality', 'accountability', 'effectiveness') in order, first, to establish our own meanings for these words and, secondly, to suggest audit procedures whose effects would be congruent with our meanings for these words. In short, 'the regulated' capture the terms and operations by which they are regulated.

Our call is more sober than Maguire's language of 'mobilizing armies of resistance' and 'non-compliance'. In our *Journal* article and elsewhere (Shore & Wright 2000; 2001) we explore, as Maguire suggests we should, how these forms of power operate – through our voluntary compliance. Whereas the audit procedures might feel very coercive, there is considerable space to achieve regulatory capture because so much of the implementation is in our own hands. Indeed, academic audit can only function properly if it induces a large measure of self-policing (or 'peer review'). Our suggestion is a re-collegialization of anthropology, a discussion about what we mean by the quality, accountability, and purposes of higher education, what indicators would demonstrate achievement of our definitions of these terms, and what procedures would operate without the negative effects of the current system.

This suggestion is particularly pertinent today. There is widespread questioning of the cost and effectiveness of the QAA's 'new

method' of assessing teaching quality. Roderick Floud, president-elect of Universities UK, argued that current systems confuse the provision of information with quality control. He calculated that the annual cost of quality control, audit, accountability, and research assessment systems in England alone is £250 million, equivalent to the pay of 10,000 lecturers or the fees of 250,000 students (*THES* 23 Mar. 2001: 16). The *THES* (30 Mar. 2001: 7) calculated that the QAA's teaching assessment exercise alone cost £100 million per annum, with an additional £3-5 million for the administrative costs of the QAA itself – all to find the 0.1 per cent of inspections that are failed. The QAA's efficiency, then, is questionable. So is its effectiveness. Did its reviews of quality really demonstrate that the shift to mass higher education with decreased resources was being accompanied by improved standards? The only comprehensive analysis of the 1,300 departmental review reports conducted since 1993 concluded that the quality assurance system was blighted by elitism, favouritism, gamesmanship, and grade inflation, and that levels of funding were an important factor determining departments' assessment results (*THES* 30 March 2001: 7). The accuracy of the QAA's picture of ever-improving quality was further undermined by an ICM poll which showed that more than half the staff polled felt that academic standards had fallen (*THES* 11 May 2001: 8).

In March, Education Ministers intervened in the QAA's plans and announced an immediate 40 per cent reduction in inspections by exempting all departments that had previously achieved 'good scores'. Ministers made no reference to the QAA's requirement that all departments nevertheless prepare self-evaluation documents in accordance with the strict qualifications frameworks, programme specifications, and subject benchmarks. Nor did Ministers alter the QAA's plans to impose institution-wide audits covering a further 200 regulations through eleven codes of practice. As a result, many leading universities have considered seceding from the QAA, arguing that it has infringed academic freedom, imposed its own bureaucratic and pedagogic agenda, neglected student 'intellectual development', and used incompetent and unprofessional reviewers.

In the midst of this political battle, it behoves those disciplines which have the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological resources to analyse how systems of audit

work, to contribute ideas for the future. Three sets of question are paramount.

First, what are the effects of QAA processes on pedagogy? The QAA insists on defining learning outcomes that can be measured against performance, and sets this up as an administrative device, claiming to be agnostic about what pedagogy higher education institutions choose to adopt. But is this the case? Are these yet another set of technologies in the drive to reduce unit costs and produce flexible workers? What are the implications of a shift towards outcomes-based pedagogy in anthropology teaching and other disciplines in higher education?

Secondly, what are the effects of the QAA regime on power structures within universities and on academic freedom? The QAA requires institutions to demonstrate their quality to the agency, arguing that if they do this effectively on paper, it will reduce its visits. If an institution responds by introducing new echelons of quality managers with powers over areas previously governed by academics, that is an internal decision of the university: the QAA, with its 'lighter touch' rhetoric, is presenting itself as less authoritarian and interventionist, innocent of the bureaucratic effects.

Thirdly, does the furore over audit merely deflect attention from the bigger problem, the transition to a system of mass education with declining resources? The QAA's new method still only looks to see if departments are using available resources to best (i.e. economical) effect. It is unable or unwilling to determine whether reductions in government resources are affecting the quality of higher education.

So far the evidence suggests that the QAA-inspired method for assessing teaching quality has little to do with improving the actual quality of teaching and learning. As Charlton (1998: 8) says, 'any such effect would be a remarkable and accidental by-product'. If better standards were the priority, one would expect more resources to be allocated to those universities found to be struggling. Instead, the system punishes those who are 'under performing' (usually because they lack adequate funding) by reducing their resources further. A more enlightened system of 'quality improvement' (the phrase used in Ireland, as Maguire notes) might require QAA reports to contain a fully costed set of recommendations for enhancing the provision of teaching. If quality assurance does not improve actual teaching quality, what is it for? The conclusion seems to be that it is an administrative system designed

for controlling employees, and all educational outcomes are subordinate to that aim. Beyond this, and in a wider political context, audit also functions as a useful instrument for introducing into the workforce (and among the future consumers and 'captains of industry') the neo-liberal norms and values of enterprise culture; in short, it is about creating new types of subject appropriate to a consumer-oriented, 'flexible' capitalism.

Maguire says we should move to obtain a clearer view of the 'supposed enemy'. We agree. Anthropologists are already embroiled in the audit regime whether they like it or not, and their passive consent and active collaboration are essential to the legitimacy and success of the audit process. But before we are induced to co-operate still further, our fears placated by the promise that these are simply 'our own standards', we need to develop a critical awareness and dialogue about what those 'standards' actually entail, and what quality means in an anthropological context.

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