Discursive Battles about the Meaning of University: the case of Danish university reform and its academics

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ABSTRACT The meaning of university and, subsequently, academics’ working conditions are rapidly changing as knowledge economy and globalisation discourses continue to deepen across the Western world. Higher education and research agendas are increasingly staged in the discursive universe of knowledge economy language: common strategies and harmonisation within Europe (the Bologna process), integration of universities into national knowledge economy strategies that adapt to signals from the World Trade Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, etc. Illustrated by the case of Danish university reform, this article traces the transition from a vanishing ‘democratic and “Humboldtian”’ university discourse’ toward an emerging ‘market and efficiency oriented university discourse’. Universities are being turned into organisations with self-ownership, which allegedly increases their freedom of operation on the research and education ‘market’. On the other hand, universities are under increased pressure to satisfy government demands, often at hitherto unknown levels of detail. Seen from the point of view of the academic worker, these processes become visible through a host of new social technologies that individualise and totalise researchers simultaneously through complex processes. The article highlights the point that constructive critique and fruitful counter-strategies must incorporate an in-depth understanding of the radicality of changes that are taking place in order to make a difference.

Introduction

This article highlights how being an academic is deeply embedded in the strategic space that current dominant discourses about the university and its purposes allow. There are many reasons for highlighting the significance of this seemingly banal observation in the current situation. I shall mention two of these.

Firstly, Western university systems are undergoing radical reforms, which I shall elaborate with Danish university reform as an illustrative example.[1] These reforms are profoundly changing what is the meaning of a university and of an academic. Secondly, the need to build up contesting discourses to counter or balance a dominant market pre-eminence in the thinking about university, academics, research and education is felt to be highly necessary by many stakeholders.

This makes it extremely timely to ensure that debates and reflections on university, research, education and so forth are undertaken on the basis of strategic insight into the university discourse that is emerging, and not solely from the perspective of a rapidly vanishing university discourse. It is thus an epistemological foundation for this article that constructive critique and fruitful counter-strategies must build upon a sober in-depth appreciation of the balances of power that make up the current situation (Ball, 1994, 2003; Deleuze, 1995/1990; Peters et al, 2000; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Wright, 2005; Krejsler, 2006, 2007 [forthcoming]). Strategies that build on outdated and romanticised images of a university that was, will at best be naive and harmless.

The point of departure for this article is the claim that the meaning of the university in many Western countries has been under gradual, albeit, radical reform, beginning in the 1980s in some countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, and in the 1990s in others, such as Denmark
and other continental European countries. These reforms have been strongly influenced by new dominant discourses in society hailing the emerging ‘knowledge economy’, the ‘market’ and a certain vision of ‘globalisation’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Peters et al, 2000; Henry et al, 2001; Clark, 2001; Wright, 2005). This is neither good nor bad as such. However, it thoroughly changes the strategic space within which academics and other stakeholders can operate and construct legitimate subjectivities.

In Denmark these changes can be observed as a transition from a university discourse that was highly influenced by discourses on democracy, professions and public good toward a discourse that emphasises the emerging global knowledge economy and the market (Fink et al, 2003; Jensen, 2004; Gregersen, 2006). An illustrative example could be the relation to academic freedom/autonomy under the reign of the 1970 as opposed to the 2003 University Act. The former primarily saw academic freedom/autonomy as an individual right and duty of the researcher within the framework of a particular academic discipline and an overarching social contract with society. The latter sees academic freedom/autonomy as an entity that a university management announces within the framework of this university’s strategic key areas and its development contract with the national ministry in order to come to grips with the demands of an increasingly competitive global market.

The analytical perspective of this article is inspired by Michel Foucault and others. It makes sense of the social world by seeking to identify the dominant discourses that set the key premises for how individuals can think and talk about themselves within particular social fields at a given conjuncture in history, such as, in this case, the university in the early twenty-first century. A discourse signifies a regime of knowledge and power that has a number of key dogma and subject positions, rules for inclusion and exclusion, and particular procedures that determine the strategic scope within which one can legitimately think and act as a subject, if one wants to retain one’s position as a subject within the discourse (e.g. Foucault, 1971).

Within this frame of thinking a discourse emerges as dominant when it converges with a number of the very influential discourses in society in order to form a configuration so powerful that individuals within the social fields touched by this dominant discourse must become subjects of that discourse in order to retain legitimate positions within that social field. A dominant discourse is thus a way of identifying the strategic space for talking and acting within a particular social field that the dominant forces in relation to that social field claim as the legitimate order. What dominant forces mean is here related to Foucault’s definition of power as ‘the name that is given to a complex strategic situation in a society’, and where it is supposed that the relations of forces that emerge in workplaces, families, institutions and so forth support and converge with the greater fissures that run through this society (Foucault, 1978). This means that the conditions for the emergence of a dominant discourse must be seen in relation to the general configuration of dominant forces in society, which is a complex game of inclusion and exclusion in relation to economic, social, and cultural practices, which are articulated in the dominant discourses that set the agenda for what is considered the legitimate order.

This does not mean that there are not a host of other discourses that continually play roles in contesting what is currently dominant. It means, furthermore, that individuals become individuals by subjecting themselves to various discourses. And each such discourse allows individuals to fill out particular subject positions, which altogether gives different strategic scopes of action. In a simplified way the author of this article could be said to be defined as an individual and dispose of a particular strategic space as a result of the positions that he inhabits in a number of discourses: an urban mid-age late-modern man in a gender discourse, a middle-class ethnic majority Dane in a class discourse, a predominantly post-structuralist researcher in a university discourse, an activist for pluralism in a diversity discourse and so forth.

‘The Democratic and ‘Humboldtian’ University Discourse’ – a vanishing discourse

I shall now attempt to identify two dominant discourses that I claim play key roles in the current reconfiguration of the meaning of university in Denmark.[2]. In a Danish context they seem to constitute dominant discourses that academics cannot avoid subjecting themselves to in the ongoing process of constructing themselves as legitimate academic subjects. I shall argue that a
transition from a vanishing ‘democratic and “Humboldtian”’ to an emerging ‘market- and efficiency-oriented’ university discourse is currently taking place. I shall identify these discourses by referring to a variety of constituent components: university laws (the 1970 and the 2003 University Acts) and logics, procedures and technologies deriving from these, political movements, pressure from external stakeholders, dominant social and economic practices and so forth.

The 1970 Act, which is the key symbolic document of what I call the ‘democratic and “Humboldtian” university discourse’, represented the codification of a prolonged struggle in Danish society throughout the late 1960s. From the 1960s onwards universities in Denmark, as well as in most of the Western world, gradually became mass institutions as industry’s and a rapidly growing public sector’s needs for educated labour intensified. In 1960, 6000 students (6-7% of the age group) achieved high school (Gymnasium) diplomas in Denmark, which constituted the formal requirement for achieving admission to university. In 2000, 33,000 (more than 50% of the age group) achieved high school diplomas.[3]

As democratic and equity discourses became part of the welfare state discourse, which had gradually become more dominant as a result, of a social democratic dominance of politics since the 1930s, and as women entered the labour market and students from more social groups entered the educational system, it became increasingly difficult to defend the elitist university, which was governed single-handedly by a small number of full professors. The elitist meritocratic and democratic discourses clashed in the emblematic events of the Youth Rebellion, the Student Rebellion and feminist struggles of the late 1960s and, interestingly, a centre-right government enacted in 1970 the University Act that largely met the demands of radical students (Kjærgaard & Kristensen, 2003; Jensen, 2004).

The thorough democratisation of society and the fact that the university was becoming a mass institution led, among a variety of other circumstances, to its radical reformulation. In the new university discourse democracy was a key word that was frequently employed in order to discursively reformulate the meaning of the university. The small number of full professors that had hitherto governed the university unilaterally within the elitist meritocratic discourse were challenged. In accordance with the general discursive onslaught on authorities, the rebellious students cried out, in the wording of the new discourse, ‘Abolish professorial rule!’ ('Afskaf professorvældet!')

In the law text that codified the changing strategic space, all deciding bodies were democratised in the sense that the posts of vice-chancellor, deans, heads of departments were to be filled through election by all full professors as well as permanently appointed associate professors at each university. Concerning the governing collegial bodies (i.e. the senate, faculty and department councils), academic staff, students and technical/administrative staff were all represented, usually according to a 50%, 25%, 25% rule. Study boards, however, consisted of an equal number of students and academic staff. A parliamentary political discourse entered the university in the sense that proportional representation was made mandatory and through the fact that political factions emerged among academic staff as well as among students.

This supported the proliferation of a particular discourse about autonomy/freedom, democracy and participation, which reached a peak at the two so-called reform universities that were established in the 1970s in Aalborg and, in particular, in Roskilde (Hansen, 1997). Here the new university discourse was marshalled into a number of social technologies that heavily influenced how one could construct oneself as an academic and a student in a legitimate way. Problem-based project work became the icon of Roskilde University and serves as an illustrative example to show how the new discourse informed new practices (e.g. Berthelsen et al, 1977). The strategy of problem-based project work can be identified by a number of traits. Participants identify a relevant problem to be investigated. They aim at linking problems in the surrounding world with issues that reflect the wishes, background, and needs of the participants. Hereafter the investigation is initiated. Relevant information must be found and retrieved and hypotheses must be tested. Subsequently, one talks less about teaching and more about learning. Therefore, the teacher must assume the role of consultant, guide, mentor, inspirator, moderator or, maybe, friend. The purpose of the project is to build up knowledge about the phenomenon investigated and to mediate that knowledge to others to whom it might be useful. A further purpose may be to take action on a knowledge-based background. Much project work simulates the scientist’s goal-directed process of testing hypotheses. Other project work draws inspiration from the artist’s creative and explorative
working processes (see also: Fried-Booth, 1986; Gartenschlaeger & Hinzen, 2001). Altogether, problem-based project work connected to the very vocal and widespread socialist, democratic and participative discourses at the time. It demanded student influence and relevance of research and teaching for the people and society.

The new university discourse, however, was no simple or one-sided discourse. It was shaped in an ongoing process drawing on many sources that were often hard to reconcile. The speech about autonomy/freedom and participation did not only draw from democratic discourses. The elitist character of university was thus sustained in many ways by the persistence of what I here choose to call the 'Humboldtian' discourse, which is still very strong among academics.

When I use the term 'Humboldtian' discourse, however, I want to stress that I use it as a relatively empty signifier, which gathers the frequent, albeit diverse claims and arguments that seek to defend academic workers' autonomy/freedom in relation to research and teaching. Many – but not all – of these arguments have a more or less explicit link to the name of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Further, it is important to keep in mind that the genealogy of references to Humboldt is complex and full of contradictions. It includes mixtures of references to Humboldt himself, practices that claim to be Humboldtian, and the many different usages of the term in order to claim legitimacy for various forms of autonomy that may or may not be aware of Wilhelm von Humboldt and the Berlin University. The point, however, is that this has become a major discourse in defending the claim that academics must be free to teach truth and knowledge as they see it, and that students must be free to learn independently and grow without being ‘spoon-fed’ (Pritchard, 2004, p. 510; Ash, 2006). For a period ‘Humboldtian’ discourse resonated well with and reinforced the arguments about the contract between science and society that was elaborated in the aftermath of the Second World War. This was based, among other things, on the argument that research autonomy often led to unexpected breakthroughs such as was the case with the theoretical foundations for the construction of the nuclear bomb (Kjærgaard & Kristensen, 2003, p. 126).

In the interviews that I have conducted within the research project on Danish University reform (see footnote 1), academics often refer – implicitly or explicitly – to a 'Humboldtian' discourse in order to make their claims for autonomy legitimate, often inspired by arguments from collegial debates or Forskerforum (Danish researchers’ union journal).

The 'Humboldtian' discourse thus has a long and fuzzy identity of its own in the developments of university regimes from the nineteenth century and onwards in many countries (Kjærgaard & Kristensen, 2003; Pritchard, 2004; Ash, 2006). This discourse – or one may even say myth at times – nominally refers to Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian Privy Councillor in charge of culture and education (1809-10), who was the pivotal figure in developing the idea for the University of Berlin in Prussia in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. In short, Humboldt argued that the state would profit from obliging itself to fund a university that was based on large amounts of autonomy and little state interference. Personality development through education (Bildung) as an individualistic, self-motivated and non-utilitarian pursuit is, according to Humboldtian ethos, an important precondition for the development of citizens and civil servants in the rational unfolding of modern society and its institutions. Therefore, the state is expected to defend academic freedom in its own best interest. This freedom rests on the recognition of the three unities:

I. The unity of teachers and learners regards professors and their students as equal in the pursuit of knowledge, which is not a fixed quantity to be dispensed or delivered, but rather a process, a search and a form of thinking.

II. ... the unity of research and teaching pertains to the communication of knowledge, and involves a kind of re-creation of the processes that produced it …

III. In the unity of knowledge all branches of knowledge are regarded as admitting of only one unified spirit bound together by reason: the whole can be seen in the part, and the part in the whole ... (Pritchard, 2004, p. 510)
Towards ‘a Market and Efficiency-Oriented University Discourse’ – an emerging discourse

The constellation of dominant discourses in Danish society changed during the 1980s, and in relation to universities new dominant discourses gained strong momentum during the later 1990s and the early 2000s. Here, I refer to complex processes that include among many other aspects: globalisation, harmonisation and marketisation (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], the World Trade Organisation [WTO], the European Union [EU], the Bologna process), individualisation and modernisation of the public sector (new public management etc.) (Reich, 1992; Peters et al, 2000; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Pelgrum & Anderson, 2001; Henry et al, 2001; Wright, 2005). This reconfiguration has been voiced mainly through neo-liberal, new labour/Third Way and new public management discourses arriving largely from the Anglo-Saxon world.

It has led centre, right and social democrat policy makers in Denmark to put on track the so-called modernisation of the public sector (e.g. Mathiesen, 1999; Ministry of Finance, 2003). They argue that the public sector must be reformed and staged in a market-like way in order to secure a rational use of limited public resources. Competition, decentralisation, and accountability become key words. Further, they refer to the global knowledge economy discourse and its argument that nations must become more competitive in the increasingly important field of knowledge production in the wake of the proliferation of information and communication technologies. Lifelong and life-encompassing learning, increased and more targeted use of the knowledge reserve have thus become key words of particular importance for political priorities.

Being knowledge producing institutions par excellence, this obviously forces universities into renegotiating substantial portions of their meaning and purpose. Fuelled by OECD reports, EU and national concerns of getting an edge in a more competitive global economy, universities and research are loosened from the strong democratic discourse and are increasingly influenced by economic and management discourses, whose main foci are economic growth and more efficient use of limited public resources.

This reconfiguration of dominant discourses in Danish society profoundly changes the criteria for legitimacy that the university has to comply with in order to retain its role as the main truth-telling institution in society. This quasi-monopolistic role is already under heavy attack from other discourses as access to knowledge has spread explosively and as the general level of information has increased and become widespread in society. University must therefore move – or be moved – closer to the dominant constellation of power-knowledge in society if it does not want to marginalise itself once again as it did during the rise of the natural sciences from the seventeenth till the early nineteenth centuries (Kjærgaard & Kristensen, 2003).

In Denmark a law was implemented in 1993 that tightened leadership at universities, enhancing the power of vice-chancellors and faculty deans. The Ministry tightened control over subsidies, cut the taximeter [4] for students and so forth during the 1990s (Hansen, 2005). Social democrats had long argued that universities had failed to contribute to more equity and were not of sufficient utility to society. In 1998, after criticism of ‘slack’ leadership and inefficient use of resources at universities, the social democratic government and its minister of science, Jan Trøjborg, used the opportunity to demand that universities entered into development contracts with the Ministry (Andersen, 2003).

This process was radicalised as a neo-liberally dominated centre-right government took office in 2001 and envisaged the turnaround of what it means to be a university, that culminated in the 2003 University Act (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2002a). Here the ‘democratic and ’Humboldtian’ university discourse’ met with a frontal attack from a more neo-liberally inspired version of the emerging ‘market- and efficiency-oriented university discourse’, which argued that university management had to be tightened, that universities had to set prioritised targets, that universities were not sensitive enough to the demands of a knowledge-based economy, that universities had to open up to partnerships with stakeholders in society (mainly business). Helge Sander, the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, summed it up in the dictum that the process from idea to invoice had to become shorter (Sander, 2005). The Ministry remoulded the research council system in a way that prioritised subsidies to the natural sciences,
information technology, health science and other areas that in their view were of most immediate utility to growth in Danish society.

These developments have had considerable effects in the sense that more state research subsidies are now strategically targeted for areas that the government finds fit, and the university governance discourse and structure have been moulded in the language of the private sector. The 2003 Act on Universities replaced democratically elected leaders and governing bodies at universities with a system that has a board at the top, which supposedly represents external stakeholders’ interests through an external majority. This board appoints the vice-chancellor, who in turn appoints deans and heads of departments and so forth. Academics’ main influence has been deposited in the Academic Council, which has only consulting power to the management. Academic expertise is thus discursively transformed into an expertise that the manager, i.e. the vice-chancellor, and the board can acquire, when they need it, in order to make decisions that concern the vision, targets and priorities of the university. The university is conceived in the image of the corporation (for an elaborate discussion on the managerial aspects of Danish university reform, see Carney, this issue); and the pervasive discursive references to freedom mainly refer to the corporation’s freedom to operate more freely in a market and as an organisation and less to academic freedom of individual researchers (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2002b; Wright, 2005).

In this process the university has been discursively dislodged from being an autonomous institution within the framework of state tutelage to being an organisation with self-ownership that has to be attentive to stakeholders’ and consumers’ demands on market-like conditions. The new discourse has produced an array of political technologies [5] in order to standardise and make the research and education markets comparable internationally. League tables, benchmarking, standardised development contracts, mergers (to increase output and minimise costs) and other instruments inspired from private business corporations are increasingly introduced. This discursive logic makes it possible for policy makers to prioritise what they see as the most productive universities.

Universities must align and pay more attention to externally defined demands in order to secure their own long-term survival in an environment that has been made competitive in a new sense. Therefore, academic staff productivity in this particular sense has come under closer scrutiny (Shore & Wright, 2000; Ball, 2003; Krejsler, 2005).

All this does not mean, however, that universities have become a market. The state still owns, controls and pays by far most of the costs of universities. Furthermore, the university boards do not have the prerogatives that boards have in private companies (Lotz, 2002). Clark here points to the pitfall that many states seek to implement entrepreneurial universities in pursuit of economic rationality by means of efficiency and accountability under centralised management. He warns that such strategies are often modelled on simplistic conceptions of what business firms are like (Clark, 2001, p. 21).

However, this discourse seems to have fundamentally changed how one can think and talk about university, academics and research. It has overturned the democratic discourse, which was not either necessarily very democratic (in my interviews younger academics, in particular, express the view that the democratic organs at department level were often seized by informal networks among the older academics, which made decision-making very lacking in transparency and marginalised substantial numbers of academics outside these informal networks).

**Changing Conditions for Constructing Academic Subjectivity**

I have described how competing discourses of dominant players in society shape the strategic space within which the meaning of university can be constructed, exemplified through the current Danish discursive struggle about the meaning and direction of the university. I have conceived this process as a transition from a vanishing ‘democratic and “Humboldtian” university discourse’ to an emerging ‘market- and efficiency-oriented university discourse’. I shall now seek to illustrate further how the current university reforms in Denmark have changed conditions for how the subject position of the academic can be enacted.
Any dominant discourse gradually evolves out of a host of micro-political struggles where knowledge and power become interwoven as meaning is constructed and practices that support new meanings emerge. Increasing pressure on universities to reform and adapt to the emerging ‘market- and efficiency-oriented university discourse’ has thus gradually led universities into a situation where they get tied up to an increasing number of political technologies that can be summed up in the term ‘accountability regime’ (Shore & Wright, 2000). This regime constitutes mechanisms to ensure that universities and their employees organise themselves in ways that conform to the guidelines and inner logics of the new truth regime. The new regime aims at staging universities as players in a constructed marketplace, where self-ownership and increased sensitivity to the laws of supply and demand become central dogma to obey, act and talk by.

The key discursive mechanisms that turn universities and academics into players in this constructed marketplace consist in a particular management of vastly increased output-control and a number of political technologies that limit how output can be thought of and implemented. Universities’ managements enter into a particular kind of dialogue with the Ministry in order to produce triennial development contracts with particular targeted areas that a university is then held accountable for honouring at the end of the contract period (e.g. Ministry of Science, Technology & Innovation, 2000; Andersen, 2003). The template for these development contacts is increasingly standardised and connected to the terminology of strategy, milestones and formulation of targets in result terms. The resources for carrying out the agreed production in the form of research, teaching, knowledge transfer and so forth are increasingly tied to quasi-market competitive instruments. Concerning the annual government subsidies to the operation of universities, the Ministry thus aims at increasing the percentage of the research subsidies that are ‘won’ in ‘free’ competition among the universities according to varying criteria from 33 to 50%. Concerning education, universities are already paid according to a so-called taximeter per student that passes study units and bachelor and graduate degrees (see footnote 3). This taximeter per student has decreased considerably during the last decade, which is supposed to give universities an incentive to become more attractive to more students, and to make sure that they pass examinations.

This new regime has obviously forced universities to pay considerably more attention to continuously monitoring whether the right mix of staff is available, and whether this staff is up to date on knowledge and skills that match the demands of this constructed marketplace. In order to make faculties and departments sensitive to this competitive turn, financial means within universities are increasingly distributed according to the number of students that particular departments manage to attract and get through the system, and according to the amount of external financing for research that departments manage to attract. We see an increasing number of mergers between departments that would otherwise not be able to survive according to market logic.

In order to sensitise each individual academic, departments increasingly pass on the obligation by putting academic staff under increased pressure to finance their own position, in the sense that they attract sufficient external funding, teach enough students that pass and so forth. The new truth regime thus affects academics in the sense that they must continuously document that they are able to maintain and develop a competency profile that matches demands under rapid change (Deleuze, 1995/1990; Ball, 2003). Ball even talks of a performativity regime that puts more emphasis on second-order activities such as documenting research and teaching than on the first-order activities themselves, i.e. research and teaching.

The academic is increasingly vested with the insignia of the private entrepreneur who makes contracts with his/her department and university within a system that is still largely a state monopoly within a Danish context. This kind of contracting is implemented through political technologies such as the appraisal interview (Krejsler, 2007 [forthcoming]). Appraisal interviews can thus be seen as a form of social contract that is negotiated by supposedly free agents in the sense that they are as a rule the result of processes of dialogue. They urge each subject of the regime concerned, i.e. the head of department and the academic employee, to exercise commitment, creativity and personal initiative by his/her own volition in order to realise the organisation’s vision as a joint venture. Here academics are encouraged/coerced into creating narratives about themselves as free agents that are calculated to match the needs and expectations of the organisation.
The university research database exemplifies another political technology that has gained ascendancy in the wake of the new power-knowledge regime. Here researchers are required to continuously list their production in the form of publications (differentiated in different categories), teaching, activity in public debate and so forth within a standardised format. This is a mandatory technology through which academic staff present an accountable self to colleagues, to the managerial level, and in principle to the public at large. The research database represents a way by which the value of staff is to a large extent standardised and made comparable. It is the point of departure for evaluating each individual academic at appraisal interviews and other staff assessment measures. The research database is furthermore a technology for self-evaluation and self-construction to the extent that the academic’s evaluation of his/her productivity in relation to a set of fixed, standardised quality denominators creates a self-image for display by which s/he will be known as a particular academic in the official version to others as well as to him/herself. The academic’s individual homepage at the university’s website thus often contains a direct link to the research database.

These new dominant trends obviously have great impact on the conditions for how university researchers go about constructing and reproducing their identities as researchers. One level of this impact is the general change in the discourses through which university is spoken, the culture, the atmosphere and so forth. Another level consists in the variety of technologies that have been introduced to help/force academics to (re)shape their professional identities and subjectivities in ways that support the new dominant discourses and in order to make academic staff more accountable.

**Conclusion**

The mapping of a new dominant discourse, which I have called a ‘market- and efficiency-oriented university discourse’, and its rapid proliferation within and profound transformation of Danish universities is not intended to indicate a final decline of university or to suggest that universities and their academics are caught in a trap of total dominance that gives no room for manoeuvring.

The meaning of university as a privileged truth-telling institution has always been an emerging and unstable entity that comes out of the ongoing struggles between changing dominant discourses in society and significant numbers of discourses that contest and continually change the expected courses of emerging dominant discourses (Kjærgaard & Kristensen, 2003). And since the university has grown out of the privilege to speak authoritatively about the truth, such an institution will inevitably get intricately embroiled in the ongoing needs of society’s power-holders to reproduce legitimacy (Foucault, 1971, 1977, 1978, 2002). Subsequently, the meaning of being a university academic is equally volatile, as the university context constitutes the strategic space within which the academic can construct him/herself as a legitimate subject. This state of indecision indicates neither a state of total domination nor a state of total freedom. It points to an ongoing struggle within changing strategic spaces and power relations as the locus for the academic’s subject construction (Foucault, 1984).

The plasticity of the subject position of the academic has thus been amply illustrated by the gradual changes in the dominant university discourse that have taken place in Denmark during the last decade and a half, from ‘a democratic “Humboldtian” university discourse’ toward ‘a market- and efficiency-oriented university discourse’. Each university discourse has been shown to represent its own strategic space, which requires its subjects to reproduce the key dogma of the discourse, which again allow, nonetheless, a certain scope for manoeuvre in the form of different legitimate academic styles, different university profiles and so forth (Foucault, 1971).

It is, furthermore, important to stress that the configurations between different university discourses and the dominant discourses in society are always in a flux and never just produce a ‘perfect’ iron cage. The always more or less indecisive state of the meaning of university and consequently of the academic as a subject position is thus indicative of the fact that a number of breaks and incompatibilities always exist in this indecisive flux. And such breaks can be exploited, inspiring us to bring in a number of contesting discourses in order to impact upon how one may balance one’s construction of oneself as a subject. Apart from democratic and ‘Humboldtian’
discourses, such contesting discourses may include a discourse on professions, a union discourse, a self-realisation discourse and many others.

The argument in this article, however, stresses that any critique or counter-strategies will benefit greatly from incorporating an in-depth understanding of the radicality of current changes as well as the compelling logic of the new dominant university discourse.

Notes

[1] This article draws from the larger context of the Danish Social Sciences Research Council sponsored research project entitled *New Management, New Identities? Danish University Reform in an International Perspective*. I hereby acknowledge the inspiration I have received from Susan Wright, Stephen Carney, Gritt Nielsen, Nathalia Brichet and Jakob Williams Ørberg. This larger project explores the reform of universities in Denmark in terms of the impact of new models of governance, the systems of management and control that arise from them, and the ways in which these phenomena are changing the professional identities of those working and studying within Danish universities. It explores these issues from the perspectives of managers, staff and students, and within the contexts of national debates and international comparisons.

My particular analyses draw on data in the form of qualitative research interviews, a variety of documents and observations from two departments at each of the three universities, at which the bulk of my research within the project has been conducted. Furthermore, this material is backed by the project’s previous pilot studies at most Danish universities and studies of documents and literature that shed light on the reform of Danish universities at a meso- and macro-level.

[2] In this article I have attempted to capture dominant features of the changes in university governance in Denmark by claiming the existence of two tentatively named, yet, dominant, university discourses, a so-called ‘democratic and “Humboldtian”’ university discourse’ and a so-called ‘market- and efficiency-oriented university discourse’. These discourses have been constructed heuristically on the basis of data collected, literature and documents reviewed within the framework of the research project *New Management, New Identities? Danish University Reform in an International Perspective* (see footnote 1).


[4] The taximeter is a calculation technique that makes a considerable part of state financial subsidies to universities dependent upon student completion rates. According to several interviews that I conducted with Danish academics, the taximeter system has been the single most important technology in changing university at department level during the last decade. It has become the most important parameter for distribution of money within the university, and has thus directed considerable attention at department level towards getting more students and making sure that they complete their studies. It has increased students’ bargaining power as well as made university teachers more oriented towards students’ demands.


References


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