Introduction: the dynamics of ideas

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The suggestion that we now live in a 'knowledge society' implies that knowledge is being organized differently. How compelling is this suggestion? And what implications might it have for the way one conceptualizes 'ideas', intellectuals and universities? Is there still a role for the intellectual who generates 'big ideas' in today's 'knowledge society'? What is the role of universities and the academics and disciplines within them? More generally, do we have any clear understanding of the relations between ideas, institutions and their social context? The contributors to this special issue on 'The Dynamics of Ideas' engage with these questions in diverse, but engagingly complementary, ways.

In his article Thomas Osborne contends that a mutation in the predominant type of ideas, and corresponding modes of intellectual work, may be occurring in ostensibly knowledge-driven societies. This involves a shift from 'oracular' to 'vehicular' ideas, where the relevant model of the intellectual is that of ideas *mediation* or 'brokerage'. Rejecting epochal models of shift between intellectual functions, Osborne does, nonetheless, suggest that there may be an elective affinity between the intellectual as mediator and broader features immanent in contemporary society. Adopting Osborne's conceptual framework, Gregor McLennan explores the possibilities of understanding the 'Third Way' as a vehicular idea. He suggests that the Third Way appears to confirm the 'vehicularity' notion: more 'popular' than many other academic political ideas, it 'splashes' on to the discursive scene, is taken up by diverse audiences and users, and progressively weakens in specific content and urgency.

This claim raises a prior question about the nature of 'ideas' themselves: are they transcendental entities with intrinsic properties? Do they have their own trajectories? Or are they constituted through the processes of their articulation? These are the questions raised by Steve Woolgar, who suggests that, while these different perspectives represent evaluative discourses that provide particular resources in distinct 'argumentative contexts', we should abandon the romantic

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conception of ideas, in both its original and its modified form and reject the audit culture that these approaches facilitate. Advocating a constitutive approach to ideas, Woolgar draws our attention to the importance of the 'means of communication', for it is these that shape the ideas so communicated.

Steve Fuller also explores different perspectives regarding ideas, suggesting that a very particular understanding of 'ideas' and their transmission needs to be in place for the notion of 'intellectuals' to have critical purchase. The 'mutation approach' to idea transmission, for example, generates an intense anti-intellectualism. The wide historical scope of the paper encompasses changes that have occurred in and through the formation of modern Western society, with reference back to the founding theories of ideas and concepts advanced by the classical Greek philosophers. In his assertion that intellectuals constitute and use ideas rather than vice versa, Fuller's argument resonates with Woolgar's discussion of the need to consider the role of those who 'market' ideas, and also with McLennan's reflections on the role of the critical intellectual.

Colin Hay's paper provides a particular example of both the transmission of ideas and their institutional embedding. He argues that there is distinct continuity between the political economy of New Labour and that of Thatcherism, which might both be labelled neo-liberal. However, where Thatcherism represented the 'spectacular' introduction of neo-liberal ideas, New Labour pragmatism has produced a less ideological, more routinized and even necessitarian character. This argument resonates with McLennan's analysis of the Third Way as vehicular. Hay suggests that normalized neo-liberalism is probably even worse than spectacular neo-liberalism, where at least strenuous debate can be fully engaged in at the level of the ideas themselves. His call for the assumptions of neo-liberalism to be demystified and deconstructed contains echoes of both Fuller's and McLennan's celebration of the critical intellectual.

Underpinning Hay's paper is an assumption that the formation and articulation of ideas is an aspect of political action in its own right. This assumption is not, however, very common among political scientists. In his paper, Alan Finlayson focuses on the extent to which ideas remain a problem for political science analysis, which still tends to be constrained by the behaviouralist preoccupation with action and outcomes. Even that part of the political science literature that embraces the 'ideational turn' works with a very limited conception of ideas – a conception that Woolgar might identify as romantic. Finlayson shares Woolgar's turn to constitutive ideas, echoing his concern with the means of communication in his call for political scientists to embrace the rhetorical analysis that has long been central to social theory but oddly absent in political theory. Rhetorical and linguistic approaches, Finlayson points out, are still rarely adopted in relation to the study of contemporary government.

This raises questions about the relation between ideas and academic disciplines, and shifts the focus of the issue from the role of critical intellectuals in the transmission of ideas to the place of academic disciplines in the

knowledge society. Where Woolgar focused on the limitations of the audit culture and its preoccupation with measuring ideas, Marilyn Strathern focuses on another facet of contemporary academia, the increasing compulsion (in research funding and policy) to be interdisciplinary. She takes Nowotny's assertion that knowledge production is becoming more and more interdisciplinary and considers the implications of this for anthropology, whose domain is not clearly bounded. Strathern is concerned in particular with the increasingly widespread use of ethnography, and more generally with the broader issue of how one distinguishes between disciplines. She implies that, while disciplines are usually understood in terms of specialist fields of knowledge that are clearly distinct in terms of both their methods and their domains, part of the 'disciplinarity' of anthropology may be that it explores relations between domains without necessarily having the need to be interdisciplinary in the conventional sense.

Reflections on the changing form of knowledge production, management and dissemination within the universities and among knowledge workers more generally, frequently rest on a prior assumption that contemporary society is best understood as a 'knowledge society', in which knowledge increasingly flows through ICT-driven networks. Yet Grahame Thompson questions any simplistic assumptions about the meaning, depth of penetration and 'globality' of the 'knowledge economy'. He challenges the glib assertion that distance and time have become unimportant in a globally connected world, and offers a more sceptical assessment of the impact of ICTs to date. Moreover, he suggests that knowledge is heterogeneous and that, while codified and routinized knowledge may play a central role in ICT networks, the role of non-transmissible tacit knowledge should not be overlooked. The production of this type of knowledge may require quite different institutions and social contexts. He suggests, for example, that the guild form of organization may offer an important alternative model for university research in the current climate.

Interestingly, Thompson's scepticism about claims of technologically-driven changes in knowledge relations is countered by Thrift's paper, which explores the ways in which massive increases in computer power facilitate new ways of seeing and thinking, or – as Thrift suggests – new kinds of 'background time-spaces' give rise to 'qualculation'. The papers are then refreshingly diverse in the way in which they reflect upon the 'dynamics of ideas', but together they map out a fascinating field of enquiry.

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