

Higher Education Futures

Part 5

Mills, David ; J. Greenwood, Davydd; Blackmore, Jill; Sarauw, Laura Louise; Smedegaard Ernst Bengtsen, Søren

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PART 5: HIGHER EDUCATION FUTURES

*David Mills, Davydd J. Greenwood, Jill Blackmore,
Laura Louise Sarauw and Søren S.E. Bengtsen*

ABSTRACT

In this section, five authors reflect on Sue Wright's academic trajectory, her work in creating disciplinary and interdisciplinary networks and her engagement – as both an activist and scholar – in institutional change-making. They also reflect on her research on university reform, neoliberalisation and higher education futures.

KEYWORDS

academic activism, academic citizenship, alternative university systems, Centre for Higher Education Futures, learning and teaching in anthropology, policy critique, situated practice, university governance and management

Critiquing audit, evaluating ourselves

The curious story of the National Network for Teaching and Learning Anthropology (NNTLA)

David Mills

GAPP. NNTLA. C-SAP. HEA. The archive of UK higher education reforms is piled high with forgotten acronyms. Sue will remember more of these than most. The abolition of the 'binary divide' between UK universities and polytechnics in 1992 catalysed a heated debate about how best to assess and enhance the quality of academic teaching. This is the story of Sue's navigation of the funding opportunities and policy discourses that accompanied what was later christened the 'Quality Wars'. Over five years from 1994, Sue led the National Network for Teaching and Learning Anthropology (NNTLA), promoting 'disciplinary-specific' educational development

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and a political reflexivity about these new discourses. She encountered pedagogic enthusiasm, disciplinary conservatism and collegial suspicion in equal measure.

Sue envisioned the network as a place to promote disciplinary conversations about teaching. Avowedly 'horizontal' in its approach to sharing insights, the network created a set of conversations about teaching and catalysed a new sub-field of the anthropology of policy. Her ambition was for anthropologists to develop a 'political reflexivity' about a contested policy landscape. Leaving relatively few material traces, its legacy is profound. A generation of anthropologists were encouraged to think critically about the anthropology of policy and to take a position on higher education governance, 'quality' and institutional rankings. In this short piece, I celebrate Sue's skill at negotiating the 'Quality Wars' (Watson 2002), her scholarly activism and reformist vision.

A short history of the NNTLA

The early years of Margaret Thatcher's government saw UK universities under siege. The social sciences were singled out for attack, with funding cuts and departmental closures, especially in the newer universities. In 1981, Keith Joseph, then Minister of Education, made a determined attempt to abolish the Social Sciences Research Council. As the number of unemployed PhD graduates grew, anthropologists began thinking about careers beyond academia (Grillo 1985). The 1983 'Grillo report' and an associated conference led to the creation of the Group for Anthropology in Policy and Practice (GAPP). Alongside a residential workshop funded for a few years by the ESRC (the funding council was reprieved but renamed the Economic and Social Research Council), GAPP ran conferences on topics such as the anthropology of tourism and the anthropology of organisations. Sue convened GAPP from 1986 to 1991 and drew on her own experience within the voluntary sector to promote research into the anthropology of policy (e.g. Shore and Wright 1997a). GAPP also hosted workshops on how undergraduate anthropology degrees might build in 'practical skills' and placements. Its aim was to create networks between practitioners and students. GAPP depended on the energy and dedication of the converted, but many of its workshop themes later became 'mainstream' topics within undergraduate degrees.

Snobbery about 'practising' and applying the discipline made this unrewarding work. A brave few spoke out about these narrow-minded status

hierarchies. Paul Stirling was an important role model for Sue. Paul had left LSE for a professorship at the new University of Kent in 1965. He had long complained about the divide between the ‘mandarins’ and the ‘missionaries’ within the discipline, and he helped to host the first ever conference on teaching social anthropology in 1964 (Mills 2008).

The 1990s were a time of continued change and expansion for UK universities. Prior to 1992, UK universities regarded quality and standards as an internal matter for each institution, a model of ‘mutuality’ and peer-group control (Scott and Hood 2004). However, government distrust of professional self-regulation grew during the 1980s, forcing university Vice-Chancellors to agree in 1988 to an academic review unit that would conduct a light-touch audit.

The situation was very different in polytechnics and colleges. The state-appointed regulator, the Council for National Academic Awards, was a chartered body charged with overseeing quality assurance procedures, working alongside external reviewers from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI). The abolition of the ‘binary’ divide in 1992 between universities and polytechnics highlighted the stark differences between these approaches to quality assurance. The universities set up their own sector-owned body, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), which was tasked with carrying out ‘light-touch’ institutional reviews. Yet universities were also required by the funding councils to participate in subject reviews of teaching quality through a new Teaching Quality Assessment procedure (TQA), accompanied by inspections and huge amounts of paperwork. The TQA became the focus of academic ire during the 1990s, and at this time many called for a reduction in this multiplying quality ‘bureaucracy’.

It was into this fraught first skirmish of the ‘Quality Wars’, featuring a battle between rival visions of quality assurance, that the NNTLA was born. In 1993, the government’s Department of Employment was focussed on a programme of education and training that would create a workforce with the ‘skills, competences and productivity to succeed in an environment of global competition’. Its Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative began a programme of funding discipline-based networks within higher education to promote such ‘good practice’. Funding for bids of up to £15,000 was sought from consortia that had ‘an adequately broad base in their discipline’.

At this point, Sue was on secondment to the Enterprise Unit at Sussex University, working to integrate practitioner insights into undergraduate

anthropology courses. Worried about the future of GAPP, she saw that it could be the basis for a funded network and wrote a bid for EHE funding. It envisaged a 'high profile report based on an audit of changes in the content and teaching of courses since the Grillo report, to document new experiments and identify continuing gaps in vocational and transferable skills'. The application was successful. 'We were over the moon', she recalled. 'I've always wanted to get debates going – and this was my first foray into getting “mainstream” people involved'. Her vision was for a network owned and run by a consortium of departments in order to avoid accusations, as she put it in an interview at the time, that 'this was just Sue and her clique'.

The new network immediately set to work and agreed to fund a programme of research into the learning and teaching of anthropology. The 'Gold report', named for its bright orange cover (Mascarenhas-Keyes with Wright 1995), is still on my shelf. From the start, anthropologists were chary of this strange new language of educational development. The minutes of the first meeting note that 'there was agreement to abandon use of loaded terms such as “innovative”, “skills”, and “good practice” and replace these with carefully worded descriptive language to identify what we want'. Participants warned of a false 'dichotomy between “traditional” and “innovative” in curriculum content and teaching method'. Everyone feared invidious comparisons between departments, or anyone assuming that 'innovation' was, in itself, a good thing. The group agreed to avoid the word, even though 'innovation' was the very purpose of the funding. Ironically, there was also discussion about writing a book on teaching and learning anthropology that would also 'count' for the Research Assessment Exercise.

Granted an additional £15,000 for a second year of the network, Sue then bid successfully for a much larger grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) – £240,000 a year for three years. This fund was set up to reward disciplines and departments that had been rated as 'excellent' in the subject review (anthropology was reviewed accordingly in 1994), with the aim to 'stimulate developments' and promote the 'take up and implementation of good teaching and learning practice' (Gosling 2013: 66). The irony of giving further funding to those already rated as 'excellent' was not lost on some commentators (Brown 2004). A series of national workshops on specific educational themes was planned, along with an opportunity for departments to bid for 'development' projects.

A meeting of Anthropology Heads of Department in November 1996 gave Sue a platform from which to describe her vision: to ‘exchange ideas on teaching and learning’, to ‘examine the relevance of educational development ideas for anthropology’, and to ‘analyse changes in our experience of teaching and learning, our profession and institutional organisation in order to understand the political economy of Higher Education and develop a shared understanding of how to respond’. Reeling from the experience of being inspected as part of TQA subject review, colleagues voiced their suspicion of what later became known as the ‘British Quality Juggernaut’ (Harvey 2005). One Head of Department asked whether the project was ‘for us or for HEFCE?’ They went on to ask whether HEFCE would be looking to this project for ideas to be incorporated into the next TQA. The shared fear was that the network was acting as a Trojan horse for the quality control bureaucrats. Not surprisingly, the minutes note that ‘it was agreed that the project should be for us’.

Not everyone was reluctant or suspicious. The Network initially intended to fund five ‘development projects’ within departments, but the selection panel that met in April 1997 at the HEFCE office in Centrepont, London were faced with choosing from sixteen strong bids. Should funding be concentrated, or all be funded partially? The panel agreed to involve all anthropology departments in some way, offering every department a yearly payment of £250 for an ‘awayday’ to discuss teaching issues. As Sue recalled, one of the ‘impediments to anthropologists understanding the changing context of higher education was that they did not talk to each other about teaching and learning in the same way as they did about fieldwork, and thus there was no collective “sensemaking”’. A key tenet of her ‘disciplinary-specific’ vision of educational development was that staff and students should use anthropological concepts and abilities to analyse their teaching and learning.

The network’s vision was that departments, and by extension, the discipline, should define their own priorities for disciplinary educational development. Each department was to have a funded annual awayday to discuss shared issues in teaching and learning. What did people value, what did they wish to change and what did they want to achieve, whether in their own practices, their department, their institution or nationally? As Sue recalled: ‘We sought to give teachers and students space to work out what they wished to do’. Both staff and students were invited to propose projects that arose from their own experience and visions for curriculum design

and teaching initiatives. At the time, I was a PhD student at SOAS. I was lucky enough to receive a network grant with colleagues to rethink student-led research training. I am embarrassed to admit that, with graduate zeal, we stirred our reformist ingredients into an over-spiced acronym soup. A two-year SOAS seminar experiment that we called 'E@TM' (Ethnography@Third Millennium) now feels very last millennium.

Entanglement, appropriation and critique

The NNTLA constantly struggled with how best to make sense of the larger 'Quality Wars' that surrounded the discipline. Being funded by the Department of Employment meant being entangled, if tangentially, in its quality discourse. The Department's support for quality 'enhancement' was predicated on the discipline's successful results in quality 'assurance' inspections. Over time, speakers at network events sought to make explicit the links between classroom practice and policy developments, ensuring that the discipline was seen to be resisting this new language and its assumptions. The network was quick to question neat assumptions that the Fund for Development of Learning and Teaching made about the 'sharing' of good practice across the sector. Sue championed 'horizontal dissemination' of good practice, advocating a 'bottom-up' approach to sharing educational ideas between peers rather than the cascading of 'expert-led' insights.

Towards the end of its life, the network became more explicit about its political position at events, in associated scholarly publications (Shore and Wright 1997a, 1999) and in its final reports. Shore and Wright's sustained analysis of higher education policy as a 'political technology' drew on both Foucauldian ideas and an attention to semantics. They argued that seemingly neutral technical terms such as 'quality', 'efficiency' and 'professionalism and responsibility' introduced new forms of governance and power (see also Wright et al. 2011). The impact of this new 'audit culture' was to undermine professionalism and discipline academic freedom, intensifying inter-institutional rivalry and competition over research and teaching rankings. The best response to the colonising effects of audit was, Shore and Wright suggested, political reflexivity. This would allow anthropologists to reappropriate the terms of the debate. They could then respond to a 'coercive and authoritarian governmentality', develop new forms of organisation and negotiate with the 'new agencies of neo-liberal power' (Shore and Wright 1999: 556, 572). Twenty-five years later, many of these



'agencies' have disappeared, having been replaced by new policy actors and a much more avowedly consumerist student culture and regulatory environment. Compared to a combative OFS (Office for Students), HEFCE now seems relatively benign.

Sue's politicised attentiveness to the 'weasel words' of educational development (Wright and Rabo 2010), and her 'disciplinary-specific' vision, was vindicated by her next move: a successful bid to host a Subject Centre that would bring together Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, one node in a new enhancement-focused Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). The National Network model was visible in the Centre's focus on bringing together different disciplinary expertise as the basis for advancing our understanding of pedagogy in higher education. With an associated appointment to the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at the University of Birmingham, the political reflexivity continued, and the view from the top of Birmingham's Muirhead Tower became familiar to those of us working with C-SAP from 2000 to 2006.

Looking back, looking forward

A quarter of a century later, and in a much-transformed world university system, one can look back on the 1980s as the end of disciplinary naiveté. Academic judgement and institutional autonomy were increasingly contested concepts within a world of rapid higher education expansion. Most academics had probably not even given much thought to the long-accepted role of external examiners as respected guardians of academic 'quality' – suddenly, the 'Q' word was being mobilised, contested and put under scrutiny. Existing attitudes to teaching and research were thrown into question. The NNTLA was a product of, and response to, this new politicisation of quality and standards.

The story of the NNTLA is one of policy appropriation and academic activism. Disciplinary evaluations of the network at the time highlighted the challenge of translating 'disciplinary' values into a language that could speak back to this new policy landscape. Less discussed was the associated presupposition that an academic discipline could, and should, have a shared set of political values and policy aspirations. The ideology of a 'small discipline' (Gledhill 2002) bravely fighting its corner in a massified higher education sector offered collegiality and solidarity. It was an ethos forged early in the history of social anthropology (Mills 2008) and one

effectively mobilised by the Network. For many, this confirmed their sense of a discipline under attack.

Since the 1990s, the policy debates and ‘Quality Wars’ have moved on. In 1990, less than twenty per cent of the UK population had experience of higher education. Today, the figure is nearer fifty per cent. This massive expansion in opportunities to benefit from higher education has come with significant changes in the governance and funding of universities, with the introduction of student fees and increasing competition between institutions. Following the trajectory of what some commentators called ‘mutuality meets the market’ (Alderman and Brown 2005; Brown 2011), debates about assuring quality have evolved, leading in 2016 to the replacement of the funding councils with a student-focused regulator in the Office for Students. At the same time, the external examiner model continues to hold a central place in the regulation of standards.

In 2022, the biggest threat to many UK university departments and disciplines seems to come not from an ever more intrusive authoritarian audit culture but rather from competitor universities. The end of centralised number planning and student number caps has led to the richest and most prestigious Russell Group universities being able to recruit ever more students. There has been a fifty per cent rise in the number of anthropology students studying at these universities between 2013 and 2018. Luring students away from other less highly ranked universities undermines the financial sustainability of their degree courses. It has led to job losses and restructuring at a number of anthropology departments, financial crises at Kent and East Anglia and the closure of anthropology at Roehampton. Not all the predictions about audit culture that Sue and the NNTLA highlighted in the 1990s have come to pass, but the rise of a competitive higher education market focussed on rankings, status hierarchies and student consumerism is undoubted. It has pitted universities and departments against each other. Whether anthropologists could have done more to influence their own universities’ active pursuit of these developments is a different matter. If the network still existed today, Sue would have spoken out.



Sue Wright

From Oxford to Sussex to Birmingham to Aarhus
to post-capitalist politics

Davydd J. Greenwood

I was first introduced to Sue Wright by Don Brenneis when he was President of the American Anthropological Association. I was assembling a team for a Ford Foundation project grant on the future of the social sciences, and Don was one of only a few anthropologists who had written something on the anthropology of universities. That project, The Social Sciences at Risk, ran from 2002 to 2003 and generated a subsequent Ford Foundation project, The Social Sciences, Higher Education Management, and Higher Education Policy: An International Network for University Reform, which ran from 2004 to 2006. Very quickly, I learnt that I should have gotten to know Sue and her work long before because, with very different training and radically different experiences, she and I share a vision of what anthropologists can and should do, something that often has felt like a solitary task. We have been collaborating on a variety of projects ever since, including the journal she and Penny Welch edit, *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences (LATISS)*, and the Berghahn book series they edit, *Higher Education in Critical Perspective: Practices and Policies*.

This encounter with an unconventional, extremely energetic, and professional anthropologist was a significant moment of encouragement for me in what was becoming a pathological higher education system dominated by Fordism and commodity production. At the time, few anthropologists were taking these issues on, as the field had fled from the study of Western societies and Western institutions, contenting itself to be sociology's junior sibling allowed to study only the 'others' beyond the pale of contemporary societies.

What Sue and I did share, as we discovered, was an ambitious understanding of the mission of anthropological ethnography, of so-called 'participant observation'. We both understood participant observation to be much more than 'spectator' research. By the time I met Sue, I already had written an essay in Spanish on the radical contradictions in the way anthropologists professionally limit their understanding of participant observation to make them into arbiters of truth and fiction in other societies. Using participant

observation as a way of distinguishing themselves from 'mere' sociologists, economists and political scientists, who practise 'spectator science', anthropologists had claimed the moral high ground of being engaged with and respectful of their research subjects by living with them in close proximity for long periods of time.

But the concept and practice of participant observation is deeply contradictory. To begin with, it was largely practised on non-Western and non-White people despite there being no methodological limitation on its applicability anywhere in the world. Relatively wealthy cosmopolitan anthropologists routinely would show up somewhere, find a way to stay there and then begin observing and participating in local life. Mostly this was done on the anthropologist's terms. That is to say, we picked what to observe, how to participate and insisted on our unique ability to interpret what we observed. Of course, real-world events during fieldwork often occurred that placed anthropologists in uncomfortable positions. Still, we mostly observed what we wanted, analysed it ourselves and wrote about it in pursuit of our professional careers without consulting the 'natives'. We also considered the results to be 'our' intellectual property.

With a few exceptions, doing anthropology in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe was derided. Indeed, I once spoke with a well-known Spanish Civil War refugee anthropologist whose specialty was Mexican Indigenous groups but who made his career in the United States. When he politely asked me where I was doing my research, I told him I was working in Spain. He bristled, said 'How dare you!' and walked away. The Society for the Anthropology of Europe, a section of the American Anthropological Association, was not founded until 1987. Only Native Americans were considered 'anthropological' subjects with a few exceptions such as the work of Conrad Arensberg on Irish rural life, Zora Neale Hurston and Hortense Powdermaker on race relations in the US South, Margaret Mead on sex and gender in the United States, and W. Lloyd Warner on American social problems. This is not because the founder of professional anthropology in the United States, Franz Boas, accepted this exclusion of the United States and Europe. In 1928, he, stated in *Anthropology and Modern Life* that:

Anthropology is often considered a collection of curious facts, telling about the peculiar appearance of exotic people and describing their strange customs and beliefs. It is looked upon as an entertaining diversion, apparently without any bearing upon the conduct of life of civi-



lized communities. This opinion is mistaken. More than that, I hope to demonstrate that a clear understanding of the principles of anthropology illuminates the social processes of our own times and may show us, if we are ready to listen to its teachings, what to do and what to avoid. (Boas [1928] 1962: 11)

Still, the Society for the Anthropology of North America was not founded until 1999. British social anthropology was heavily immersed in the study of British colonies and a good deal less interested in ethnography at home.

Rather than being a study of ‘humans’, anthropology had become limited to the study of the non-Western ‘others’. Anthropology had a decidedly paternalistic vision of the world, even if anthropologists did produce much new knowledge for Westerners and some fascinating views on human behaviour. Added to this was the development of a set of rules of conduct imparted in most anthropology programmes. First amongst them was that anthropologists in training had to learn not to ‘intervene’ locally but just to ‘observe’ lest they lose their ‘objectivity’.

Some anthropologists found these restrictions unacceptable. Eventually, the field of applied anthropology was founded in the 1940s and many anthropologists worked on behalf of the Second World War efforts to defeat Germany and Japan. Still, to this day, in academia, ‘applied anthropology’ is treated as a second-class form of anthropology. The ‘pure’ anthropologists treat applied anthropologists stereotypically as those who have little theoretical acumen or have some kind of vocation for service rather than a serious interest in advancing ‘science’ and critical thinking.

This history is important in situating Sue’s work and helps explain why I find it especially interesting. We both had similar training in these restrictions and found ourselves similarly uncomfortable with the idea of this kind of patronising academic commodification of other cultures. Sue, after extended fieldwork in Iran, soon moved into ‘development studies’ and then into ‘cultural studies’ in search of a different, pro-social, proactive and more universalistic role for anthropologists. She began to develop and advocate a different and more ambitious potential for anthropology including community studies in England.

Sue turned her acute ethnographic eye on the organisations that produce these contradictory and paternalistic views and soon began to innovate in creating a field she called ‘the anthropology of policy’. From there, to foreshorten the story, she moved to applying this perspective to higher

education both organisationally and culturally. With these moves, her practice of anthropology came full circle to questioning the organisation of the very ground on which we academics now stand, a ground I also found myself standing on with similar discomfort.

This framework has led Sue to writing masterful ethnographies and policy critiques that go far beyond the 'spectator' view and that include transdisciplinary work with critical accountants, policy-makers and other social scientists. By moving this way, Sue has articulated a larger mission for anthropology: studying humans collaboratively for the purpose of creating better-functioning and more human systems in all organisational spheres including higher education. In addition to the many policy critiques and the graduate courses and extensive mentoring she does, Sue's work actually comes back to the foundational notion that ethnography can be a source of inspiration for the improvement of the human condition. This harks back to the founding mission of political economy, a mission that was hijacked in the world of discipline-bound territories and purges of scholars who dared comment on racism, inequality, gender prejudice, nativism, etc. The latter part of Sue's career has homed in on the promotion of significant and fundamental higher education alternatives to neoliberal, audit culture higher education systems.

Along this trajectory we met, began to find common ground and ended up as long-term collaborators in a variety of projects. My main experience of Sue was as a thorough and discerning ethnographer, critical and generous colleague and tireless organiser of initiatives that engage people from many disciplines, countries and statuses in the gradual creation of a much-needed international network as a counterweight to neoliberal higher education policy and practices.

Down in the trenches, working with Sue has always been exciting. Both an avid learner and a colleague with a sharp but kind critical eye, we began our sustained interactions when she invited me to Copenhagen for a couple of weeks during which we read and critiqued each other's work without mercy. This was a unique kind of academic invitation. Dividing our time between reading and critiquing each other's work in extended and enjoyable sessions, we began to be able to articulate our distinctive voices and strengths while finding common ground to move forward on. This kind of serious collegial engagement is vanishingly rare in neoliberal academia, and I still remember the sessions and what I learned with pleasure.

Sue's ethnographic abilities, the ability to see and sustain details and turn them into larger queries impressed me. No empirical subject is too complex for her to tackle – be it the Danish Ministry of Education's accounting or the structures of the laws and policies affecting higher education or the incredibly complicated EU collaborative research grants processes which she has twice managed to bring home successfully. To our interactions, I brought more explicit ingredients from action research and the study of cooperatives and industrial democracy – all of which led me to anthropological views on the reform of higher education. Together, we honed our collaborations, with Rebecca Boden, on a field trip to Mondragón University in Spain and the writing of a research report that began to give structure to our shared interest in organisational and cultural alternatives to neoliberalism in higher education.

How and why the anthropology of organisations, the anthropology of policy and the anthropology of universities are mutually implicated

As most readers know, there is a massive critical and not-so-critical literature on higher education and higher education reform. Despite the hundreds of books and thousands of articles, it is extremely rare to subject universities and university policies to comparative analysis with other organisations and policy arenas. For a long time, this produced a rather self-referential literature and analysis that either made universities appear to be idiosyncratic (e.g. 'loosely-coupled organisations', 'ivory towers', etc.) or claimed routinely that most of the ills of universities came from outsiders importing a 'corporate' model on higher education or from selfish, narcissistic faculty who only cared about themselves.

Sue and I brought to this discussion quite different organisational experiences. Sue's experiences with Sussex University and then with Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the Thatcher higher education reforms brought the organisation of higher education and higher education policy to the forefront as an instance of the anthropology of organisations and the anthropology of policy. My experiences with the management of a university-wide transdisciplinary programme in science and technology studies, a subsequent two-decade-long experience of managing and promoting a large multi-college multidisciplinary centre for international studies and education, and a collaborative effort to create

what became one of the largest action research programmes in the United States all had given me unintended ethnographic lessons on higher education policy and practice.

What links these trajectories and perhaps underlies our shared sense of better future possibilities is that we independently discovered that higher education is subject to the Tayloristic organisational repertoires, the radical individualist ideologies and the commodity production ideologies and practices that dominate in neoliberal globalisation. The larger analyses and critiques of neoliberalism apply to universities and need to be deployed against the ongoing demolition of higher education as a source of an informed and pro-social citizenry rather than an obedient, individualistic, new technified proletariat. But are alternatives possible?

Ethnography as a battering ram

The hegemony of neoliberalism, as Gibson-Graham so effectively argue in *A Post-Capitalist Politics* (2006), relies on the general population being unable to imagine that any better alternative exists or is even possible. What I so much admire from the years of collaboration with Sue is that really good organisational ethnography can frame the viable and liberating alternatives to neoliberalism in higher education. This is the power of ethnography in Sue's hands. A couple of examples can make this point better than vague generalities.

Following the money

In 2010, Sue, with her colleague Rebecca Boden, did a study of Danish University funding in great financial and ethnographic detail. This study showed that all the reorganisations and changes in university statuses actually revealed drops in funding for teaching, small increases for research, and significant increases in administrative salaries and overhead. Far from fulfilling the supposed commitment to more 'rational' and 'efficient' management, these changes further hierarchised university organisational structures. Pointing out that the espoused theory and the theory-in-use are at direct odds with each other presents a frontal challenge to the ministers, policy-makers and vice-chancellors who are selling their projects as the only ones possible.



Doing the 'double shuffle'

In the work published with Jakob Williams Ørberg, 'The double shuffle of university reform – the OECD/Denmark policy interface' (2011), Sue and Jakob used refined ethnographic analysis to compare policy statements, policy justifications and empirical consequences in Danish universities of the application of neoliberal policies to higher education. Though the argument is complex, the basic finding is that the policy that claims to be making Danish universities autonomous actors free to pursue their interests is accompanied by the destruction of collegial university management involving the faculty and by the heightened accountability for performance according to indicators set from outside the universities. This 'double shuffle' is seen in the contradiction between the ideological justification for university autonomy and the increased central accountability, surveillance and intervention. This strategic and critical use of ethnographic research is Sue's hallmark. Gathering her many studies and the results of her EU research projects together moves the focus of work on higher education reform to organisational structures and policies. The use of ethnographic research promotes the emergence of a much more nuanced and actionable understanding of the neoliberal takeover of higher education and its institutional and human consequences.

The constant in this work and in the work of others of us following these lines is that neoliberalism and the accompanying neo-Taylorism is an all-out effort to convert universities into professional training schools and fee-for-service research factories. Many institutions are closing departments in the social sciences and humanities on the supposed grounds that these fields do not prepare graduates to enter the workforce, a claim that is both false and malicious. What we see from Sue's work and that of her many colleagues (Cris Shore, Christopher Newfield, Wesley Shumar and others) is that these moves are aimed specifically at fields that cast a critical analytical eye on the behaviour of academic administrators and state and national policy-makers. They want a politically-passive, obedient university system that delivers trained and obedient workers to twenty-first-century industry. In return, they reap handsome salaries and coteries of administrative enablers. The university as a source of civic renewal, of social mobility and of civic engagement is being annihilated in plain sight.

One of the difficulties ethnographers have always faced is that when we present a case that does not conform to the reigning ideology the case

is dismissed as being an ‘exception’ or a ‘fluke’. Sue clearly is aware of this strategy of dismissal of information unwelcome to policy-makers and senior administrative leaders. To address this problem, she has been tireless in fielding a number of multinational projects with numerous transdisciplinary collaborators and graduate students. Projects like Universities in the Knowledge Economy and European Universities – Critical Futures have been organised as action research projects in which the participants have had a significant voice in setting the agenda and delivering the results. These projects combine an organisational and ethnographic focus with multinational comparative data, and they have clearly confirmed the universality of the harsh neoliberal dynamics revealed in Sue’s earlier studies of the Danish system.

All of this logically leads to the question that Gibson-Graham pose: are alternatives to the status quo possible, even thinkable? To this question, Sue’s work and that of the network of colleagues she has assembled around the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) at Aarhus-DPU show that alternatives both exist, are sustainable, and that therefore a better higher education world is possible.

Focussing on alternative forms of higher education institutions has become a key part of Sue’s agenda, both in portraying alternative possible decisions to the ones being taken in Denmark and in examining alternatives elsewhere. The large EU research projects focus on this effort and on training younger researchers to develop similarly transdisciplinary and ethnographic skills. For example, Sue supported and expanded the work of Catherine Butcher on alternative forms of higher education that included analyses of Berea College and Deep Springs College in the United States on the way to a model of collaborative management of higher education by faculty with significant student engagement. Promoting Butcher’s work, Sue dedicated a key part of the Universities in the Knowledge Economy (UNIKE) capstone conference to organising sessions of key actors working on a variety of alternative university systems around the world and the emerging publications (see the articles in Wright and Greenwood 2017).

These and other examples from the EU projects do provide a preliminary answer to Gibson-Graham’s question about the possibility of alternatives. The answer is ‘yes’, and the alternatives are far superior in both educational and human terms to what is being sold as the unalterable rules of neoliberalism. Reinvigorating the idea of higher education as collaborating communities of faculty, staff and students committed to teaching, research



and an ethic of mutual care is not only desirable but clearly necessary in the face of the global economic, ecological and political crises we face. Only collaboratively managed, transdisciplinary and socially committed higher education can contribute to the amelioration of the disasters neo-liberalism has wrought for the majority of humanity while enhancing the wealth of the 1 per cent who benefit from this destructive and unsustainable system.

Conclusions

In Sue's trajectory, it is possible to trace her moves from detailed and discerning ethnography to policy critique and organisational ethnography in higher education to the use of these tools to promote democratic higher education reform based on the values of solidarity, multidisciplinary and empirical clarity. Viewing her career shows us a coherent, consistent, still-developing trajectory of an admirable scholar, colleague and social actor who has never given up faith that knowledge can make us better. Sue is a unique example of living the alternative vision of higher education and society on a daily basis as a colleague, mentor and social actor. No one should confuse this path with a smooth road. It has involved moves from Oxford to Sussex to Birmingham and then to Aarhus-DPU in Copenhagen with all the cultural and linguistic adjustments this entailed. Her combination of energy, courage and belief in a better future should leave us all with a sense of profound respect for this marvellous anthropologist.

The good academic citizen

Collaboration, intellectual generosity and criticality

Jill Blackmore

To begin this article, I need to acknowledge that it was originally intended to be co-authored by myself and Julie Rowlands, an associate professor, colleague and friend at Deakin University, who succumbed to cancer in December 2021. Julie, with her usual thoughtfulness for others and forward-looking management skills, insisted I write this article on behalf of both of us. Julie was also a good academic citizen (Blackmore and Lund 2022).

For those who research in higher education, one of the stand-out and most cited articles in the field in the past twenty years has been the article on ‘coercive accountability’ (Shore and Wright 2000). This article preceded and captured the structures of feeling and the cognitive dissonance of academics in many national contexts who felt they were becoming compliant in a system of managerialism which de-professionalised them, but which also exploited their desire to be good researchers and teachers in a thriving and dynamic intellectual culture. In so doing, academic practices changed while striving to meet the performative needs of management and government in ways that were distracting and detracting from their core work of teaching and research. I referred to this in *Performing and Reforming Leaders* (Blackmore and Sachs 2007) as academics negotiated the tension and contradictions between ‘being good’ by meeting short-term performance management requirements and ‘doing good’ in terms of seeking longer-term substantive social justice outcomes from teaching and research.

Once this article was found, I/we continued tracking the research of Sue (and Cris) in what has been an intellectual feast based on a shared concern over the changing role of the university. These changes were characterised by neoliberal policies, political instability and serial organisational restructuring, increased managerialism, incremental disenfranchisement of academics from decision-making, and a multiplicity of contradictory accountability measures, all of which were changing academic practice. Julie traced Sue’s research in her doctoral and later comparative research (Rowlands 2017) on academic governance which had positioned her as a key authority on the reduced power of academic boards in Australian universities. For me, university governance was critical to my studying university ‘leadership’ (better described as executive management or managerial capital) and the impact on academic work of research assessment, which was also informed by Sue’s work (Wright 2009). We both referred to a shift, from a Bourdieusian perspective, from intellectual capital to managerial capital (Rowlands 2011) based on the exploitation of the academic passion for teaching and research (Blackmore 2022). Our research in Australia, as has Sue Wright’s with colleagues in Denmark, has charted over twenty years the incremental effects of the corporatisation of the academy driven by managerialism, marketisation, quantification and, most recently, commercialisation/financialisation and digitalisation in the context of a dis-course of institutional autonomy (Wright and Ørberg 2008).

In Australia, my research voiced academic concerns that the role of universities as a critic and conscience in a democracy with the social responsibility to focus on benefitting the public good as well as educating a generation of critical professionals and scholars was being undermined (Blackmore 2022). The effect of the wider context of global edu-capitalism and the managerial rhetoric about being ‘agile’ in a volatile geopolitical climate were used to justify the exertion and expansion of executive power within the academy (and for vice-chancellors, to receive outrageous salaries) (Boden and Rowlands 2022). But institutional flexibility/autonomy has been marked by the undermining of academic working conditions, the casualisation of employment, the disenfranchisement of academics from decision-making, and the intensification of academic work due to the acceleration afforded by technologies and resulting from multiple external accountabilities such as research assessment producing unsustainable work–life conflict. Academics now gift their labour (up to ten to twenty hours per week) due to structural overtime, over which Dutch academics are now protesting, upon which the higher education sector has become dependent (Blackmore 2022). This, as multiple studies have shown, has gendered effects as women continue to be the primary carers (in Australia certainly) and as women academics are concentrated in the humanities and social sciences, which, due to serial organisational restructuring, have been in decline. The policy context has been one of reduced government expenditure on universities and research and one that has seen an ideological mobilisation of divisive culture wars and an attack on the humanities and social sciences in particular. The accumulated effect of the carelessness of government and university management is an overwhelming sense of de-professionalisation and loss of academic freedom (Blackmore 2020a).

It was on the basis of our related research that I, and then Julie, were invited to join as associates in the two international EU projects led by Sue Wright: The University Reform, Globalisation and Europeanisation project (URGE, 2010–2014) and then myself on the University in the Knowledge Economy project (UNIKE, 2014–2017), which brought together doctoral and postdoctoral scholars and academics in a major capacity-building project. As an Australian academic, I marvelled at the investment by the European Commission in research after we had experienced, over two decades of a conservative Australian government, either indifference or antagonism towards higher education. The URGE and UNIKE projects were both critically edgy with a strong sense of purpose, aiming to build research capacity

and nurture the next generation of researchers. Both projects under Sue's leadership created a space where academic activists gathered, debated and considered various scenarios as to the future of the university. We voiced a shared desire to see better and fairer higher education systems, ones which would be respectful of students and academics while protecting academic freedom and critical stances.

Sue is an excellent organiser, and the conferences associated with the URGE and UNIKE projects that she led required significant intellectual input from their participants and came with an expectation that something productive would emerge from this academic collaboration in terms of publications and future research input (the URGE project initiated twenty-four research seminars, five PhD courses, eleven conferences and workshops, and nine working papers as well as forty articles). Underpinning both projects was a strong methodological and theoretical framing. The texts which resulted offer a collective international voice about the state of higher education. In the introduction of *Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy*, which came out of the URGE project (Wright and Shore 2017), Sue and Cris state that public universities have been subjected to the forces of neoliberalism – privatisation and competitive individualism – with the aim to ‘convert universities into autonomous and entrepreneurial “knowledge organisations”’ (2017: 1). The trends they mapped from the URGE project were:

- State disinvestment – or risk-free profits for private providers;
- New regimes of promoting competitiveness;
- Rise of audit culture: performance and output measures;
- Administrative bloat, academic decline;
- Institutional capture: the power of the administariat;
- New income streams and the rise of the ‘entrepreneurial university’; and
- Higher education as a private investment not a public good.

These trends illustrate how neoliberal policies produce similar effects in the different national contexts of the United Kingdom, Denmark and New Zealand. These trends were confirmed in our Australian research and illustrate that, while it is important not to generalise across national contexts about neoliberalism as an ideology, practice or concept, neoliberal policies have generalising effects on values and practices through different localised articulations.



And in all instances, including the URGE project, our research in Australia and the following UNIKE project, a key theme emerged: the increasing lack of trust between university management and academics, with academics feeling increasingly disengaged and disenfranchised from leadership. The vulnerability of the public university and the carelessness of both politicians and university management was manifested particularly in Australia with the COVID-19 pandemic because of the sector's reliance on international students and academics to fund research (Blackmore 2020a). Furthermore, the policies and organisational restructurings mobilised to supposedly address this financial crisis mostly impacted women and the humanities and social sciences.

As argued in the papers presented at the URGE and ten UNIKE conferences, the gendered aspects of the decline of the public university cannot be ignored, as education markets and edu-capitalism do not deliver equity and are not based on the public interest. This is despite the numerical feminisation of higher education at a time when the field has lost the capacity to protect itself and its knowledge-making legitimacy from political volatility, false truth, private capital and geopolitical shifts. As stated in *Death of a Public University*: 'Dislocated, dismembered and progressively unbundled, the public university today exists in a state of chronic fragility, servitude and uncertainty that has left it if "not dead" then permanently moribund and drained of autonomy and agency' (Shore and Wright 2017: 18).

Despite this, the UNIKE project, in tracking the shifting ecology of higher education at the last conference, finished optimistically and looking forward to the future of the public university. The final session included the collective writing of a manifesto asserting the need for universities to be based on collaborative forms of organising, shared decision-making, collegiality and academic freedom in order for them to earn public trust and proactively work for the public good through teaching, research and academic activism.

Surprisingly, and not without trying, I have never co-authored with Sue, although we constantly work to find projects which we can undertake together through our respective and often incompatible funding systems. We have worked to develop parallel research projects such as in my Australian Research Council project on *Leadership in the Entrepreneurial Universities: Diversity and Disengagement* (Blackmore 2022) and a recent application entitled 'Knowledge-Society-State Relations: Research in Post-Pandemic Australia', which links well with Sue's current project, *European Universities – Critical Futures*. Our long association has meant that as Director of

Deakin's Centre for Research on Educational Futures and Innovation I was able to forge institutional ties by supporting the establishment of the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) in 2017. This was, as with many initiatives in a university, a long and arduous process, requiring international input insisting on the importance of such a centre for Aarhus as a university in the global field, and perseverance by Sue, who achieved its establishment, more despite and not because of, university management.

International collaboration was the basis for the establishment of CHEF, consolidated by a Memorandum of Agreement which has nurtured scholarly exchanges and joint activities between Deakin and Aarhus. UNIKE participants attended a Deakin higher education conference, and five Aarhus early career academics undertaking PhDs have been visiting scholars at Deakin. Deakin academics have been visiting scholars at Aarhus – for example, Julie and Sue's collaborative project on the impact of research assessment on academic practice in Denmark (Rowlands and Wright 2022). Jill worked with UNIKE participants, and Julie co-authored with Rebecca Boden on vice-chancellor salaries (Boden and Rowlands 2022). Rebecca Lund co-edited with Julie, and now myself as substitute, a special issue on epistemic injustice in *Critical Studies in Education* (Blackmore 2020b).

The success and sustainability of this cross-national partnership is because the institutional agreement was based on existing research collaborations and not initiated by managers as a form of executive action at an institutional level based on global rankings. It exemplifies the aims of both Deakin's strategic research centre in education (now expanded to become Research for Educational Impact, or REDI) and CHEF to focus on transforming education for social justice. As stated in the aims of CHEF, this relationship is premised upon a 'proactive and inclusive' international network of scholars who seek to provide alternatives to how we organise and practice education. In particular, CHEF's three research trajectories coincide with those of Julie's and my own experience of and research on university governance and my current role in the recently established Australian Association of University Professors. The AAUP has argued that academics and students are the university and not the executive managers, has produced a statement on professional ethics and is now part of a Public Universities Australia (PUA) alliance including national student and tertiary education unions demanding a reform of university governance.¹ These individuals and organisations share the same concerns as REDI and CHEF: to analyse contemporary university ecologies and how higher education is



positioned within rapidly changing political, environmental, economic and social landscapes; how academic practices have been transformed through processes and practices of managerialism, marketisation and financialisation and what that means for student engagement and professional ethics; and finally, how critical research can consider different university futures and models of organisation based on cooperation, collegiality and professional ethics. Many PUA members are actively looking to create alternative models of universities and are looking to Europe for exemplars.

Core to the academic practice of international collaboration has been hospitality and intellectual generosity tinged with strong criticality. Central to this collaboration is a shared understanding of what constitutes good academic practice that has to be defended: peer review based on an ethical approach to academic citizenship, a willingness to collaborate and mentor, together with an inquiring mind. Sue epitomises what it is to be a good academic citizen with her eye for detail, critical analysis, acute ability to go to the heart of an issue and openness to new theoretical paradigms. I have been subject to, and benefitted from, her critical enquiry about my research on gender equity, and for that I (and on behalf of Julie) thank her.

Universities can be premised on core principles of ‘democracy, equality and sustainability’ (Shore and Wright 2017: 18). There are alternative models of organising and practising: cooperative universities, free universities in the pubs, cafés, libraries, museums, etc., or a trust university based on legal co-ownership, mutual trust between employees and management, and trust based on a new social contract with society in terms of a service role for the public good. Academics continue to live with the hope that there remain such possibilities for the future of the public university.

Studying Wright through

If Susan Wright were a policy concept that spoke back to the world

Laura Louise Sarauw

In Susan Wright’s work on university reform, people are not just *reacting* to a reform but *enacting* it in various ways. Likewise, she positions her own research as an enacted practice, which is, at the same time, entangled

with and acting on the world in various ways. This article takes as its starting point that Sue Wright's research can be explored in line with the policy concepts she has studied in her work on university reform. What characterises a contested concept is that it is not tied to an *a priori* meaning but morphs as it is subjected to different translations across actors and sites (Shore and Wright 1995, 1997b, 2011; Wright et al. 2019). Policy concepts are not neutral, objective representations of the world but (moral) practices with performative effects on the world, which can be contested and translated in multiple ways. Her policy-ethnographic work on university reform has extended the understanding of how policies operate in contemporary (neoliberal) regimes. In these publications, she has continually shown that the study of written policy documents cannot stand alone. If one wants to understand a reform, or other social phenomena, one must explore its performative effects, and Sue Wright's work has shown us that these are by nature unforeseeable and open-ended. Hence, taking the present article as an example, it can be viewed as one out of many possible performative effects of Sue Wright's work, while other articles in this Festschrift represent other performative effects. When these articles are read in continuation of one another, I am convinced that they will confirm the value of her approach to the social world as multi-determined and open-ended. They are not 1:1 imprints of Wright's work but radiate in many different directions, which can also be contested (Wright et al. 2019: 42).

The single unrepeated event

When I first encountered Sue Wright's work, I was struck by her persistent use of the past tense when describing her empirical material. In her articles and books, actors never 'do' anything. The ministry never releases a report or passes a new law. Not because this does not happen, but because the events that we report in our studies took place in the past and, therefore, must be written in the past tense. When I asked her about this approach, she explained that it positions the act as a single unrepeated event. It is a statement against the overgeneralising language that we meet in the media and policy, and often also in the social sciences, where you are, for example, often faced with claims about students who 'worry about the future' in a study that took place last year. On a much later occasion, her insistence on the past tense was an onto-epistemic statement. It is a way of insisting on research and knowledge production as a situated practice, which is tied to



the historical and geographic moment and makes it a methodological point. Knowing the world is a work in progress, and knowledge itself is an unsettled practice between an endless number of unrepeated events.

Studying through the anthropology of policy

As a researcher, I am also dispersed. I do not know where Wright's thinking ends and my own thinking begins. She was the co-supervisor of my PhD thesis, and ever since it has been hard for me to distinguish what I have read in her books from what has been inscribed in my mind or conveyed unreferenced into my thesis as an outcome of our intense discussions over lunch. When my students ask me for an exact reference for something that I just said, I always feel a little panicked because I am sure that I somehow owe it to Sue Wright. So how can I write this contribution about her work without primarily writing about myself? I find it similarly challenging to tell exactly where her contribution to the research field begins. Obviously, her countless ethnographic policy studies across many actors and sites are major research contributions. They thoroughly demonstrate the value of approaching policy reforms as messy and unforeseeable. However, I am convinced that Wright would not accept talking about a specific field of research or point of origin. Instead, she might have gone about it as she has often done in her research when asking what made this thinking possible. What other events (philosophy of science, governance, media, etc.) are taken up, negotiated, contested and sometimes ascribed to new meanings in her works?

In my PhD thesis (Sarauw 2011), I positioned her works as a three-fold contestation of research that went before her. First, I argued that the works of Sue Wright and her co-authors reassemble post-structuralist and feminist theory and ethnographic policy research. Second, I argued that her works refuse to treat concepts, institutions or individuals as *a priori* entities or coherent units, which implies a reaccentuation of the lived everyday dynamics of policy reform as an important object of study. Third, I argued that her works replace the linear and causality-oriented models of the social sciences with an open-ended ontology and an approach to history as a continuous struggle over the right to define the phenomena of the world, in which the researcher is also an actor.

Clearly, these ideas stand on the shoulders of others. They can be seen as part of, but not reduced to, the discursive and material turn that took

place within the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Butler 1990; Callon 1984; Haraway 1991; Latour 1990; Mol 1999; Shore and Wright 1995, 1997b; Strathern 1991). Clearly, my understanding is relative to my own limited experience. In my own transition from a student in the history of ideas, literature and modern culture to a PhD student in education, Wright and her co-authors' outline for an anthropology of policy (Shore and Wright 1997b) and the methodology that she later sketched under the catch-phrase 'studying through' (Wright and Reinhold 2011) stood out as a way of bridging the post-structuralist and feminist approaches that I knew from my previous training with a policy-practice-oriented approach, which also encompassed the lived lives of people as an important object of study. Amongst others, the latter concept differs rather significantly from the widespread disregard for politics and mass culture understood as people's everyday experiences that I had previously encountered.

In comparison with other contemporary policy researchers in education, such as Stephen Ball (1994), who, on the one hand, described policy as a process and, on the other hand, argued that all policies run through a pre-defined policy circle, Sue Wright and her co-authors' approach to university reform as an open-ended process had instant appeal. Things happened, but they did not need to happen in one particular way. Some meanings may become temporarily hegemonic, but they are genuinely unstable and open-ended, and no policy regime is stable (Wright and Reinhold 2011). Universities, as we know them today, are not the result of a neutral and necessary historical development. The present order is not an uncontestable endpoint.

Wright and co-author Sue Reinhold contrast their 'studying through' approach to the 'Whig view on history', which traces how one thing led to another in a sequential row characterised by inevitability and immutability. From a contemporary perspective, which is coloured by post-structuralism and feminist theory, this point is rather unsophisticated, but I do nonetheless think that it contains a relevant critique of governmentality research (e.g. Dean 1999; Rose 1989), in which the conclusion about the *modus operandi* of power is often known in advance. Regardless of a shared emphasis on the power of language in the formation of a subject, and regardless of a similar critique of neoliberal governance (e.g. for responsabilising the individual for structural problems by constructing him or her as autonomous), Wright and her co-authors' open-ended ethnography has excelled in showing how the effects are not always the same across actors and sites. Matters are different, and those differences matter, even as they are always entangled with power.

Enacting moments of enactment

A question that cuts across Sue Wright's work is why and how some positions gain more influence than others. Why and how do some ways of conceptualising individuals, institutions and governments at certain points become hegemonic in open-ended processes that can potentially move in any direction?

In her work, language is often the main site of study. Language is the place where power is performed. It does not refer to static *a priori* entities. Language is therefore a vehicle for a dynamic and continuous struggle over the right to define the meaning of key concepts and tropes. By tracing how concepts are tied to different meanings across different actors and sites, her work demonstrates how policies and their key concepts morph as they move; how policies are sometimes made to work by assigning a new meaning to a well-known concept – for example, 'autonomy' or 'freedom' – and how new meanings may become momentarily hegemonic (Wright and Ørberg 2008). Her analyses show how the continuously morphing meanings relate to turns within the power-subject-language triangle but are never uncontested or stable. For example, she paraphrases Judith Butler in saying that change often inevitably happens because 'although everyone is taught what gender is and how to perform it, nobody ever does so perfectly, and they enact it slightly differently each time' (Wright et al. 2019: 43).

This approach differs from approaches that either emphasise the individual or the structure as their starting point. Similarly, it rejects the dichotomy between bottom-up and top-down approaches to policy reforms. Wright and co-authors Steven Carney, John Krejsler, Gritt B. Nielsen and Jakob Williams Ørberg refer to the complex dual meaning of the concept of 'enactment' to illustrate this point, because it can be used as an expression of both 'a top-down view based on laws and institutional power, and a bottom-up view of multiple actors shaping their institution in day-to-day life and actively contested changes' (Wright et al. 2019: 3). Furthermore, Wright and her co-authors argue that it is possible to identify so-called 'moments of enactment', in which 'a certain meaning of a keyword was established as dominant, translated into practice and planted like a "stake in the ground" around which everyday academic life revolved for a while' (Wright et al. 2019: 308), and, according to the authors, a 'succession of "moments of enactment"' have gradually but extensively transformed the governance of the university. To me, studying social transformation by moments of enactment

stands out as a strong alternative to the classic distinction between micro- and macro-analysis. However, it also leaves me with two mutually entangled questions. First, I am wondering about the onto-epistemic status of the moments of enactment; what qualifies as a moment of enactment, why, and how should we grant them a privileged position in our research compared to the continuous indeterminate ‘enactments’ that went before and came after these very moments? Second, what constructs of (our knowledge of) the world does the emphasis on moments of enactment entail? The two questions together form a third question about the (moral) agency of the researcher, a question to which I will return in the next section.

In response to my first question, I imagine Wright remarking that, since we cannot speak of events as *a priori* more constitutive than others, outlining the ‘moment of enactment’ will always be an empirical matter. Based on the entire assemblage of materials, one must ask oneself: what is constituted as such? Her response to the second question might be that her research interest is in contestations and shifts within definitions (and power) rather than in continuities and that the emphasis on moments of enactment captivates exactly those shifts. I do, however, hope that she will return to me somewhere in the lived life so we can discuss whether there is something important that an analysis that revolves around one or more moments of enactment does not tell us about the world. For example, what happens to the intermediate spaces, where history writes itself with ‘grey-in-grey’ and where people’s lives take place? How is it possible not to end up with research which is reductive to the entangled complexities of everyday life and, ultimately, the processual understanding of (knowing about) the world that characterises other parts of her work? Furthermore, I would like to discuss with her the relation between moments of enactment and single unrepeatable events. For me, my encounter with Sue Wright can indeed be described as a threshold experience, but it cannot be pinned down to a specific moment in a specific text or conversation. Rather, it was an ongoing and much-appreciated discussion of her work with multiple beginnings and endings, some of which are represented in the present article.

If the contested concept spoke back to the world

Earlier I argued that Sue Wright’s work could be viewed in line with one of her contested policy concepts, understood as a concept continually negotiated and tied to different meanings across actors and sites. However, while



the concept will depend on one or more actors outside of itself to obtain a given meaning, Sue Wright can immediately speak back to the world. If I gave her the chance to respond, I imagine that she would reply to my critique by talking about the (moral) agency of the researcher, for example, in determining what is included or excluded as a moment of enactment. According to Rikke Toft Nørgaard and Søren S.E. Bengtsen, ‘academic practice becomes activist when we lend our thoughts, words, and voices to others and let them speak through us’ (2021: 508). I imagine Sue Wright opposing this understanding of academic activism as a neutral messenger for positions which are non-identical and where the researcher’s decision to disseminate is what constitutes the political. Instead, I imagine her arguing that all research is inherently activist. First, because a world which consists of multiple unrepeatable events that cannot be grasped or made sense of without conceptualisation and interpretation (and critique). Second, as Sue Wright herself has pointed out on many occasions, this is because research itself is performative and productive and therefore also participates in the perpetual contestations over the right to define the concepts at stake (e.g. Wright et al. 2019: 319, 321, referring to Haraway 1991; Law and Urry 2004). In Sue Wright’s research, a political and activist enactment is, therefore, a precondition, and her works on university reform are also agents in the continued contestation of the role and the purpose of the university. For this reason, she argues, research in higher education comes with a (moral) obligation to work out what we want our words and actions to mean and to thereby shape the institution and its political context (Wright 2004; Wright et al. 2019: 323).

Conclusion

Dear Sue, I remember arguing with you about conclusions. I argued that writing a conclusion on my PhD thesis would be inconsistent with its open-ended approach and allude to a false closure of an everchanging making sense of the world. And I remember your response: I was theoretically right, but, based on the same theoretical premise, the temporary stilling of the conclusion can provide a space for reflecting upon what it means and, if you like, for contributing to the continuing struggles over meaning. Thank you, Sue, for making this point.



Dare to hope!

Søren S.E. Bengtsen

I came to meet Sue when the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) was founded at Aarhus University in Autumn 2016 and formally launched in 2017. For the last seven years, we have worked closely together as leaders of CHEF and as colleagues at the Danish School of Education (DPU) at Aarhus University. Even though we have been based at two separate campuses of DPU placed in two different parts of the country, we are in touch regularly and have developed a strong collaboration in leading CHEF and promoting higher education as a research field at Aarhus University, nationally in Denmark, and on the international scene. I am exceedingly grateful for having had the great privilege to work together with Sue and learn from her expertise and experience, and she has been, and still is, like a mentor to me. From working with Sue, I have learnt many things, and I will focus especially on three key issues here.

Policy–practice interconnectedness

In higher education research and development, the contexts of policy and practice are often kept separate, with separate knowledge and practice communities and with conferences and journals often focussing on *either* policy *or* practice. Sue has a very keen eye for the way in which higher education policies always shape our educational, research and leadership practices, and how practices, in turn (if enabled to do so), may inform, qualify, contest and inspire policy-making. In CHEF, Sue has advocated and promoted this policy–practice interconnectedness, or ecology, with a particular focus on issues around academic freedom, research integrity, internationalisation, well-being and academic citizenship. Sue has shown that it is not enough to study the policy–practice nexus: one must also walk the talk. She has indefatigably acted as a mediator, broker and facilitator between otherwise separate realms, bringing together academics (students, teachers, leaders), policy-makers, unions, NGOs and professionals from external companies and organisations, who would not otherwise be in the same room and in dialogue with each other. Such meetings would sometimes result in a slight uneasiness and uncertainty when the different groups would not know



exactly the norms and script for such meetings – but, as I have learnt from Sue, this is also the moment where things may actually become open for change. Sue has always masterfully balanced and sustained the collaborative spirit in such meetings, so that people would not withdraw and defend their pre-defined positions but would open up and start to listen to each other and discuss issues *with* each other. Sue has a strong competence in promoting and sustaining an ‘ecological criticality’ as each stakeholder (or actor), through dialogue, comes to see and understand their own point of view from various other perspectives, so that the criticality may become multi-directional and pluralistic in scope.

International view

Sue has been, and still is, a very important influence on university studies and higher education research in Denmark, where she has lived and worked as a professor of higher education for over twenty years. From Sue, we, in Danish higher education contexts, learnt the importance of viewing and studying one’s own context from an outside perspective so as to critically explore, and perhaps change, one’s preconceptions. This Sue has achieved by continuously bringing the Danish context into comparison and critical dialogue with international contexts, which makes visible that political decision-making and the formation of academic culture are not predestined but can always be done differently depending on the choices that are made and responsibilities that are undertaken. Sue’s strong collaborations with researchers in the United Kingdom, United States, Spain, Portugal, Eastern Europe and Australia have matured the understanding in Denmark that internationalisation is important for a stronger national and local institutional footing and identity-shaping process. By welcoming, and learning from, others and by embracing differences, one’s own world opens up and becomes larger and more diverse. New opportunities arise when differences meet.

Change-making

From working with Sue, I have been strongly inspired by the values which drive her long-term academic and societal vision forward. Inherent in Sue’s academic work, including research, education and leadership, is the striving for equity and equality. Sue will always insist that everyone should have a

voice and a say, which has been particularly powerful to witness in events where she has brought students, researchers and leaders together on equal footing in discussions about the future of universities and higher education. These instances of change-making happen from within such spaces of togetherness and inclusivity; they cannot be forced. Sue has the courage to listen to new and other voices and learn from different perspectives. Sue instils hope in the people and projects she is involved in – a hope that seems persistent and foundational, which is, I believe, why the notion of future(s) is so important in Sue’s legacy. How past, present and future intersect but do not predetermine each other seems crucial to Sue’s approach to her research, teaching and academic leadership. This hope is not always easy to realise or for people (including myself) to embrace, since we are often caught up in our daily routines or comfortable worldviews. But this hope, nevertheless, endures in Sue’s academic pursuits and, therefore, keeps the rest of us on our toes and encourages us to reach further and become bolder in our striving for democracy and diversity.

A toast

I would like to conclude this article with a note of thanks. I propose a toast to Sue: thank you for instilling hope and courage in all of our academic work and in our communities and for insisting on the possibility for better and promising higher education futures. Thank you for bringing us all together, and I hope we may be able to continue your work and vision in our universities and societies in the years to come.

David Mills was trained in anthropology at SOAS, and subsequently held academic posts in development studies, anthropology and cultural studies and sociology at Birmingham, where he worked with Sue Wright atop the Muirhead Tower at C-SAP. He is now based in the Education Department at Oxford University. His research interests include the history – and historiography – of anthropology and the circulation of academic knowledge. He is currently working on African academic publishing and the citation economy.
Email: david.mills@education.ox.ac.uk



Davydd J. Greenwood, Goldwin Smith Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, Director of the Einaudi Center for International Studies (1983–1995) and Director of the Institute for European Studies (2000–2008) at Cornell University, served as President of the Association of International Education Administrators in 1993–1994. A Corresponding Member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (1996), he has published ten books and scores of articles on the anthropology of Spain, universities and action research for democratic organisational change, including *Creating a New Public University and Reviving Democracy: An Action Research Approach* (Berghahn, 2016) with Morten Levin. Email: djg6@cornell.edu

Jill Blackmore (AM, PhD) is Alfred Deakin Professor in Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Australia, a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences and Vice-President of the Australian Association of University Professors. She researches from a feminist perspective education policy and governance; international and intercultural education; leadership and organisational change; spatial redesign and innovative pedagogies; and teachers' and academics' work, health and well-being. Recent projects are school autonomy reform and the geopolitics of transnational student mobility. Her latest publication is *Disrupting Leadership in the Entrepreneurial University: Disengagement and Diversity* (Bloomsbury, 2022). Email: jillian.blackmore@deakin.edu.au

Laura Louise Sarauw is an Associate Professor at Roskilde University in Denmark. Her research takes a policy–practice angle on reforms in higher education. She is currently exploring how new policies on student well-being contribute to reshaping the role and purpose of higher education. Email: sarauw@ruc.dk

Søren S.E. Bengtsen is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Philosophy and General Education, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark. There, he is also the Co-Director of the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF). He also serves as the Chair of the Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society (PaTHES) and as Vice-Chair of the Danish Network for Educational Development in Higher Education (DUN). Email: ssbe@edu.au.dk



Note

1. See AAUP and PUA statements at <https://www.professoriate.org> and <https://puau.org>, respectively (accessed 15 June 2023).

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