

On the Struggle for Hegemony in Post-Fordist Higher Education

Alcoverro, Adrià, 2020. *The University and the Demand for Knowledge-based Growth. The Hegemonic Struggle for the Future of Higher Education Institutions in Finland and Estonia*. Stockholm: Södertörns university.

Anmälan av Kristina Boréus

The demand for knowledge-based economic growth and the effects of that demand on academia are the key topics of Adrià Alcoverro's dissertation *The University and the Demand for Knowledge-based Growth. The Hegemonic Struggle for the Future of Higher Education Institutions in Finland and Estonia*, Corona-time defended in a Zoom meeting that connected the author in Greece with an opponent and a grading committee spread out across different parts of Sweden.

The Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE) is a concept that began to appear in OECD documents in the second half of the 1990s, according to the author. The aim of the dissertation is to analyse “*the order that results from the top-down steered HEI [Higher Education Institution] reforms that redefine the character of university activities. The academic workplace is taken as the empirical terrain to situate the global and vertical nature of HEI reforms (...) in relation to their local implementation*” (pp. 28–29, emphasis in original).

Depending on what “analyse” is taken to mean, the aim can be interpreted as more descriptive: to describe the order caused by the reforms and their impact on university activities, casting light on the connections between a global phenomenon and local implementations of it. Or it can be understood as more theoretical: to relate empirical findings to theory and thereby gain new theoretical insights. I think both facets are attempted in this very theory-dense dissertation that also includes two ambitious empirical case-studies.

In this review, some of the key concepts of the dissertation, and some of its theoretical background, will be presented. I will briefly account for the case studies and how they are analysed within the dissertation's theoretical

framework, the research questions and the methods chosen to answer them, as well as key results. In the more evaluative part of the review that follows the summary, some questions regarding how conclusions were drawn from the empirical material will be posed, which leads to a more overarching question regarding the place of the case studies in the dissertation's research design. A theoretical problem indicated by certain wording in the dissertation will also be raised.

The knowledge-based economy in post-Fordism

The summary below is based on Alcoverro's presentation of the idea of the knowledge-based economy, its place in the current phase of global capitalism and its influence on higher education.

The KBE is the idea that knowledge is an economic asset, which should be developed to enhance production. This leads to the notion of higher educational institutions as the producers of knowledge that will strongly benefit national economies. These ideas have triggered university reforms worldwide. The strategy was launched by international organisations, such as the OECD and the EU, and has been picked up by governments all over the world since the 1990s, especially after the 2008 global financial crisis.

The attempts to promote the KBE are inherent in modern capitalism. In a nutshell, "KBE-inspired policies, such as HEI reforms, respond to the reconstitution of the material grounds of capitalism in its present expansive phase" (pp. 141–142). The KBE is analysed as a feature of post-Fordism; Fordism and post-Fordism are concepts used by the neo-Marxian regulation school. Fordism was the era in capitalism that started in the postwar boom and lasted until the early 1970s. It was characterised by mass production based on steel and oil, often taking place in large factories. Many societies developed negotiated compromises between workers, employers and the state. There was a comparatively high level of state regulation of the economy, and welfare states were developed in some parts of the world.

Post-Fordism, on the other hand, is based on knowledge and IT rather than on steel and oil. Production is flexible and networked and capitalism is often disconnected from the sites of production. The process has meant a shift of power compared to Fordism's compromises between labour and capital to the advantage of capital, not least through an increasingly powerful financial sector. This sector has intensified capital accumulation and enhanced inequalities. Another characteristic of the era has been marketisation. Many immaterial spheres of ideas, knowledge, creativity and education that remained outside the economic sphere during Fordism have been pulled into the struggle for economic growth. Crises have been constant in the post-Fordist era.

Case studies

The results of two case studies of higher education institutions are presented in the dissertation. The HEIs were selected from two countries, Finland and Estonia, both of which have been presented as “global forerunners” of policies committed to KBE and in their usage of the countries’ universities in their reform strategies. In Finland, the chosen HEI was the Department of Media at Aalto University outside Helsinki. Aalto University, founded in 2010, was designed to be a super university for the new times, the Finnish KBE flagship university. It was an outcome of a reorganisation of the Finnish university system, representing a paradigm shift from a national to a global understanding of political economy in the post-cold-war era. In Estonia, the Ragnar Nurske School of Governance and Education at Tallinn University of Technology was the selected case. This university aspires to become a front runner university for Estonia’s KBE policies. The case studies were carried out with the help of an elaborated analytical framework, presented in the next section.

Analytical framework and research questions

The framework for the study is based on the theorising of Antonio Gramsci. A number of Gramscian analytical concepts were used, of which some – base, superstructure, historic bloc, and hegemony – play a central role in the analysis.

In Alcoverro’s analysis, the KBE is a political project initiated by leading elites in the present era of capitalism: it is ideology produced within the superstructure of society, designed to extend capitalism to new areas of exploitation. Narratives (an analytical term also used by the author) support KBE and its place in the HEIs. A historic bloc, in Gramscian terms, defines the relation between ideology, politics and the economic conditions in a specific socio-economic formation. According to Alcoverro’s analysis, KBE inspired HEI reforms constitute a move towards the formation of a new historic bloc. When this bloc is in place the promotion of KBE will be hegemonic, i.e. these ideas will not only be promoted by the ruling elites but also form part of a commonly accepted, taken-for-granted understanding. Neither the power structure and order of the socio-economic formation, nor KBE’s function in it, will then be seriously challenged. The road to such a state of hegemony is not smooth, however, and the move from Fordism to post-Fordism also produces contradictions that can be described as a decoupling of base and superstructure, which can result in a void between the experiences formed by the socio-economic situation of groups of people – like university employees – and ideology production.

From this analytical framework the author sets out to answer the research question of what the basic features of the university order in Finland and Estonia are and how that order is maintained. He operationalises the question into (a) how the order is framed or presented in a number of programmatic

documents and (b) what ideological and political elements constitute the basis of the HEI and how this order operates in the academic workplace and manifests itself in everyday university practices.

Methods and results

To answer sub-question (a) a number of policy documents, understood to be about grand plans for universities, were analysed and some high officials were interviewed. Key institutional documents, such as tenure tracks plans, were also studied. The documents were analysed in a rather complicated manner: line-by-line coding was adopted to collect pieces of narratives, which were then connected to a “grand narrative”. Key concepts and arguments were identified and related to a larger context.

To answer sub-question (or -questions) (b), interviews with a number of employees in the two departments were conducted. These were asked to tell their personal work stories. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with PhD students, senior researchers and professors.

An overarching finding was that a fragile consent to the order based on a vague horizon of a prosperous future existed, expressed both in the documents and by the interviewees. Such ideas were often expressed through solutionism, i.e. “the idea that given the right code, algorithms and robots, technology can solve all of mankind’s problems” (p. 145). However, Alcoverro also found tensions, and analysed how they were overcome by concealing narratives. Tensions and concealment are central findings to which I return below.

From this summary of parts of an unusually rich and complex (and long!) dissertation I now turn to commenting some of its results and raise a question about its research design.

Comments to the empirical results

The empirical study seems methodologically sound. There are, however, some inferences made from interview quotes to conclusions about tensions and concealment that are difficult to follow.

The author constructs an overarching narrative from the analysed documents and then relates this narrative to the interviews at departmental level. Here he finds contradictions between the narratives and the employees’ lived experiences, from which he draws conclusions about the existence of more profound contradictions in the order and how these contradictions are concealed. The results pointing at contradictions and concealment are central ones viewed from the Gramscian theoretical framework and the author also presents them as important (see e.g. the table on p. 228 and a number of section titles including expressions such as “unfolding of hegemony through a conflict of

interests” (p. 187), “the concealment of the political” (p. 221), a “post-political narrative to conceal a conflict-ridden reality” (p. 226), the “illusion of ‘normal science’” (p. 271), the “masquerade of the scientific field as a pure intellectual competition space” (p. 281), and “[d]eception of Science as Usual” (p. 318)).

Sometimes more clarity regarding how the conclusions about tensions and concealment were drawn from the empirical material could be asked for. A first case in point is when the author interprets the narrative at Aalto University as stating that the space for creativity is endless while, at the same time, individuals experience limits to their autonomy since there are rationalised plans that divide the production process into different stages. It does seem realistic that individual employees sense a limit to their autonomy in this fashion. My complaint here is that there are no particular interview quotes or other data that support this interpretation. The result also raises the question whether such limits in autonomy by a divided production process are something particular to the post-Fordist economy – work was divided in Fordism too. Neither is it explained in what way this contradiction is concealed.

Other examples of this lack of transparency of how conclusions are drawn from the empirical study are found in the study of the Estonian department. Here Alcoverro starts with quotes, some of which are unclear as to how they support the author’s interpretation. An example is the interpretation at p. 214 that the “importance and the joy of collaborative work is shared in the multidisciplinary context”. I see no talk of or expressions of joy in the quotes but references to mixed experiences of the work conducted. Likewise p. 216 refers to “a collaborative work that vibrates with a sense of togetherness and care”: this is something I cannot read from the quotes provided.

A last example of when I would have liked to see more empirical data clearly underpinning the interpretation is the statement that “[f]lexibility and competitiveness are thus hegemonic instruments that end up naturalising the practices derived from these inequalities” (p. 220). It is easy to understand that the demand for flexibility and competitiveness works to control people in academia, just like in many jobs outside of academia. But are the practices *naturalised*? They might well be, more or less in different contexts. Naturalisation of an order of work, of inequalities and other practices is important because it is related to hegemony, which, in turn, is related to societal power. Therefore it is also an interesting empirical question to what extent a certain practice is naturalised in a particular context. That is what I cannot read from the interviews made at the Estonian university department. It is not clear to me how the existence of such a naturalisation is derived from the case study.

These comments on the interpretation of the empirical material bring me to an overarching question regarding the dissertation: what is the role of the empirical case studies, more exactly? I do not deny their value: they do provide interesting insights into two academic institutions that were designed

to promote KBE and they inform the reader about how the academic staff experiences its work situation. Yet, we can pose the question of what we learn from them. The dissertation is written from a deductive perspective with a well elaborated theoretical framework. What is an author free to see empirically from such a well elaborated theoretical superstructure? We already know the place of the universities in current capitalism and we know from the start that they share most of what is important for the dissertation:

“TUT [Tallinn University of Technology] and Aalto are in Estonia and Finland respectively the flagbearers of a global move to integrate the university within the economic productive machinery. (...) Given, then, the fact that TUT and Aalto operate along the same premises and within the one capitalist world system, offering answers to our research questions by way of a comparison of our two cases would only yield marginal differences, and thus would potentially obscure the larger picture. For, these two orders ultimately derive from the same global movement, and therefore *it is more helpful to see the TUT and AU departments as two sides of the same coin, which while revealing distinctive legitimization strategies in dealing with their specific contexts, they do so against the same backdrop of challenges and systemic pressures*” (pp. 302-303, emphasis in original).

Deductive studies are certainly legitimate but starting with detailed theory risks obscuring the complexity of social reality. Especially given that the findings are not in all cases well supported by the empirical data but follow nicely from the theoretical point of departure, I would have liked to see a clearer motivation for the case studies in the research design. They are not there to test theory. Are they empirical illustrations? Do they serve to develop theory? What do they teach us that we did not know beforehand?

Another question that this dissertation illustrates but has not created itself is of a theoretical nature and regards the issue of agents within structures in different structural theories.

Are there any agents?

There are many examples of personification of structures in the text; these are examples (emphasis added throughout):

“The ultimate *goal* any order *wants to achieve* is...”; an order *striving* towards” (p. 117)

“a specific socio-economic formation *capable of implementing its political agenda*” (p. 128)

“the central antagonisms that the narratives *seek to conceal* in their attempt at” (p. 221)

In other words, the socio-economic order and narratives are seen to have goals they want to achieve, to strive, to have political agendas and to be deliberately seeking to conceal antagonisms. It is interesting that this personification from a structuralist Marxian perspective also often occurs in discourse analysis where it might be stated that discourses “try to” or otherwise act like planning subjects. It is wrong in both cases: neither socio-economic structures and conditions, nor discourses or narratives, have goals or attempt to do anything at all. They affect people and social relations in certain ways, for instance by concealing the true nature of the social relations or leading to general organisational shifts, but they are not planning agents themselves.

This language is in a way more confusing in the case of Marxian theory than in discourse analysis. In more radical brands of discourse analysis agents are really played down and understood to be contingently constructed in discourse. From a Marxian perspective, agents may also be understood to be constructed by the circumstances – individuals are not the main drivers of history – but contingency is left less room. The emergence of certain types of agents – such as social classes or individuals in certain positions – is the result of particular traits in the historical development: technological progress and changes in the ownership of the means of production. This would also, at least in theory, make it easier to designate the agents. Who are or were they when the ideas of KBE and the new role of HEIs were developed and promoted, globally and locally? Who is upholding the new order in the HEIs and why? These to me would have been very Gramscian questions.

Or should we understand today’s society only in structural terms, as networks, and not consider agents? This is a radical thought and if that is the idea it could have been developed. If this is the case, however, agency should not have been allowed to creep back in through wording about structural phenomena.

Strengths of the dissertation

I have commented on some interpretations of the empirical material and pointed to a certain lack of clarity in the connection between the empirical study and the theoretical “superstructure” in the research design and text. Another problem I had with the dissertation is that the text could – at least partly – have been more accessible. The theoretical problem about structure and agency in the KBE related processes I raised is, however, more of an interesting issue for discussion that Alcoverro or others writing in the post-Fordist tradition could take further. Admittedly, to ask for more theoretical work in this thesis would be to ask for too much.

As should be clear from my comments above, to be the opponent to this dissertation was a challenging, but also a very rewarding, task. The dissertation is thought-provoking and interesting. It is possible that it makes a theoretical contribution to the regulation school that the author does not quite spell out himself. It deserves further discussion by the best experts in the field. The thesis is also a very ambitious, theoretically well informed study of current academia that is of relevance for all of us who are part of it. Furthermore, the dissertation represents a commendable attempt to make sense of a very complex reality and tackle important issues of power – just as social scientists should do.

Svanberg, Mikael, 2020. *Partierna och demokratin under författningsdebatten 1965–1980*. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Anmälan av Nils Gustafsson

Under pandemins år 2020 skedde det ovanliga att författningsfrågor började diskuteras i den allmänna debatten i Sverige. Det visade sig att regeringarna i flera av Sveriges grannländer använde sig av långt starkare åtgärder för att hindra smittspridningen av Covid-19. Detta berodde kanske främst på att regeringen, i synnerhet under våren, följde rekommendationer från sina expertmyndigheter, som förordade en strategi som innebar relativt milda inskränkningar. Men det visade sig också att Sveriges regering saknar möjlighet att i fredstid exempelvis inskränka medborgarnas rörelsefrihet genom utgångsförbud eller reseförbud. För fredstida kriser finns ingen särslagstiftning i de svenska grundlagarna som tillåter regeringen att utfärda undantagstillstånd eller överta beslutsbefogenheter som normalt tillkommer riksdagen. I vilken utsträckning grundlagen tillåter att medborgarnas friheter inskränks rådde det delade meningar om i den debatt som under höstens andra våg av smittspridning uppstod med deltagare som civilrättsprofessorn Mårten Schultz och folkrättsprofessorn Mark Klamberg (Schultz 2020; Orange 2020).¹

Den plötsligt uppflammande diskussionen framstår som ett undantag: i allmänhet har det inte funnits något större intresse bland vare sig politiker,

1 Flera vetenskapliga arbeten som studerar Sveriges respons på pandemin utifrån ett konstitutionellt perspektiv har publicerats eller är under bearbetning; se inte minst denna tidskrifts (*Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 2021, nr 5) temanummer om beslutsfattande under pandemin eller *Svensk Juristtidning* (2020, nr 10) temanummer om rättsliga aspekter av pandemin, samt Jonung 2020.