Paper:
Muellerleile, C. & Lewis, N. (2019). Re-assembling knowledge production with(out) the university. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 1-10.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2019.1602352

RE-ASSEMBLING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION WITH(OUT) THE UNIVERSITY

Introductory paper for the themed issue of *Globalisation, Societies & Education*

Chris Muellerleile[1] & Nick Lewis[2]

March 2019

Note: While the complete special issue is not yet published, the five substantive papers are available on the *Globalisation, Societies & Education* website:
https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cgse20/current

Abstract
As an introduction to the themed issue, this paper interrogates the idea of university unbundling through a critical reading of Ronald Coase's theory of transaction costs. Coase, who was initially interested in the structure of firms, later applied his transaction cost theory more broadly to anything that might be defined as 'welfare'. Not unlike other abstract economic theories, in the age of market discipline, Coase's ideas have been widely employed to discipline the provision of public goods with market forces. Read through Coase, the main effect of the unbundling discourse has been to rationalize the university—to make it subject to a logic of efficiency as an end, and ultimately we suspect, to do damage to universities as important institutions for the cultivation of democratic values and socio-economic justice. After a brief summary of the other six papers included in the issue, the paper concludes with a discussion of the possibility of maintaining a public university in light of the neoliberal discourse of unbundling.

Keywords: universities, unbundling, assemblage, transaction costs, efficiency, Coase

Introduction

If you pay attention to the current socio-economic literature on universities and higher education, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we are living through a crisis. As one of the popular stories goes, if universities do not adapt quickly, mostly by aligning with capital, they will be replaced by other institutions that can provide the same services, but at a lower price and higher quality. With decreasing public support, rising levels of tuition and student debt, and the rapid growth of both privatization and technocratic management structures in formerly public universities, it may in fact be appropriate to label this as a crisis. But this assertion should not be accepted uncritically. It is important to understand who is suggesting there is a crisis, and why.

This special issue of *Globalisation, Societies and Education* was partly inspired by a 2013 report suggesting that a crisis was underway, or at least a 'revolution' was in store for universities across the globe. We are referring to the infamous "An Avalanche is Coming" report, co-authored by the current Chair of the UK's Office for Students, and long-time senior advisor for Pearson PLC, Michael Barber. Barber, et al's (2013) prescription for survival in the face of this inevitable revolution is to "unbundle" the various products and services currently packaged up in the university and expose each to market forces. Barber, et al. present unbundling as a simple,

[1] Chris Muellerleile, Swansea University, Department of Geography, c.m.muellerleile@swansea.ac.uk
[2] Nicolas Lewis, University of Auckland, School of Environment, n.lewis@auckland.ac.nz

uncontroversial, and common-sense solution in the face of crisis, which conveniently frames those who would stand in the way as old-fashioned and overly conservative. The report is analysed in depth by Lewis and Shore (2019) in their contribution to this issue, so we will not dwell on it here (see also McCowen 2017, Robertson & Komljenovic 2016). That said, one of our main goals in editing this collection is to resist the assumption that unbundling is a coherent set of ideas, and furthermore that it is inevitable. We also want to resist the idea that universities are habitually intransigent in the face of 'progress'. These effort begins by digging deeper into the socio-economic assumptions that lie behind proposals like Barber et al's. As such, by way of an introduction to this collection of papers, this essay explores and critiques the idea of (un)bundling in the context of the economic theory of *transaction costs,* including how that theory has been used in neoliberal efforts to privatize and marketize higher education.[3]

Our initial observation in calling for these papers was that both technological change and entrepreneurial actors were not just unbundling universities, but in effect 're-assembling' both universities as institutions as well as academic knowledge itself, something that Bacevic (2019) explicitly analyses in her contribution. Furthermore, we were interested in whether and how the call to unbundle relates to what some see as a neoliberal assault on universities. At the same time, our intention was to avoid the reductive impulse that suggests a neoliberal steamroller is arbitrarily destroying public universities across the UK and U.S. Rather we wanted to examine specific cases of transformation in the university sector in an effort to shed new light on processes like privatization, financialization, and digitization, which are often clumsily grouped as neoliberal. We took a cue from Geoff Mann's book, *Dissassembly Required* (2013), an attempt to demystify "actually existing" capitalist processes in the wake of the sub-prime financial crisis by focusing on the intersection of material processes in the economy with dominant economic ideas driving and shoring up those process. In the same way, this collection investigates the messy realities where concrete processes of university restructuring intersect with ideas put forth to enable, justify and criticise those processes.

Put differently, the impetus for the original call for papers was a desire to explore the middle ground where two contradictory truths meet, splinter and take imperfect and contingent form. First is the capitalist bulldozer, maybe best exemplified by moves to unbundle, dismantle, and privatize public universities, or to paraphrase Newfield (2019) the "quiet intimidation of the spectre" of a marketized destiny. And second, widespread efforts across the globe to improve access, integrate useful technologies, and otherwise 're-assemble' higher education and academic knowledge even if it no longer involves what many of us imagine to be 'the university'. We hope this special issue makes a small advance in knowledge in that direction.

Before diving into the substance, however, it is appropriate to offer a bit of background. Each of the papers collected in this special issue relate to a recently concluded project called Universities in the Knowledge Economy (UNIKE)[4], which ran from 2012-2016. It was an EU funded Marie Curie Initial Training Network (ITN), coordinated by Professor Susan Wright of Aarhus University in Denmark, and included senior professors and research fellows at five other European universities.[5] As part of the ITN scheme, the entire project was organised around the training and research of 12 Ph.D., and 3 post-doctoral fellows, all of whom conducted original research on universities and/or the higher education sector. During the final conference for the project, themed "University Futures" in June of 2016, a group of us organized two sessions on assemblages and disassemblages of knowledge production in relation to the contemporary

[3] While we clearly see a 'Coasian' logic at work in the Barber, et al. report (2013), this is our reading, and the authors do not explicitly mention transaction costs or Ronald Coase. That said, we are not attempting to present a genealogy of the ideas presented by Barber, et al. Rather we are critically analysing broad trends related to the economization and marketization of higher education and we see unbundling as a quintessential example.

[4] The project website includes extensive information the project, its outputs, and the various people and institutions involved: http://unike.au.dk/en/

[5] One of the authors of this paper, Chris Muellerleile, was post-doctoral fellow on the project, and the other, Nick Lewis, was an associated partner.

university. Six of the seven papers collected here were part of that session, including this one. As the handling editors we are biased, but it is an extraordinary set of papers, and we hope you will find the time to read them.

Transacting competition

The logic behind bundling or unbundling a group of activities has several antecedents, but we are mainly interested in Ronald Coase's theory of transaction costs, which he first devised as a way to explain the "nature of the firm" in 1937, and for which he won a Nobel Prize in 1991. In the context of what most economists believed was a highly efficient system of production coordinated by markets or 'price mechanisms', he was interested in the relationship between the market and the firm. The basic problem for Coase was to explain why firms choose to expose some exchanges to market forces (e.g. purchasing goods from a supplier) and not others (e.g. managing activities across multiple corporate divisions). His answer began by suggesting that both market transactions and internal firm relationships were subject to the same basic rationality, that of cost reduction. He proposed to frame all relations linked to production as "transactions", each of which entailed costs related to things like communication and coordination. For Coase, even market transactions were costly, an assumption that few economists had considered in any detail. Complex relationships that required sustained coordination or planning, particularly in the face of uncertainty, were less costly to 'manage' inside of a firm, rather than bidding them out to the market. He explained this by saying "the distinguishing mark of the firm is supersession of the price mechanism" (p. 389). On one hand, if firms were efficient because they insulated their activities from the market, Coase wondered why *all* economic production was not internalized in one giant firm, perhaps not unlike a socialist state. On the other hand, if markets are highly efficient at distributing goods and services to those who most needed them, and entrepreneurs constantly seek to meet market demand, why is production not "distributed amongst millions of tiny firms" (Walker 1988: 382). In other words, why are large firms necessary at all? Reality is somewhere in between these extremes, and Coase and his followers, most notably Oliver Williamson, wanted to understand why (Carroll & Teece 1999).

In Coase's transaction cost theory, firm structures are not determined by institutional history, local path-dependency, or cultural embeddedness, but rather the vertical integration or 'make or buy' problem. Analytically, for any component of the production process, the question is simple. Considering all possible costs, is it less expensive to produce something, or to go out to the market and buy it? Whether considering the centralization of management bureaucracies at the end of the 19th Century, the growth of diversified conglomerates in the 1950s and 60s, hostile takeovers and asset stripping in the 1980s, or even today's digital platform monopolies, the historical evolution of the corporate form in the U.S. could be explained with this theory. In each case, the calculation of the costs of internalization versus those of externalization drive corporate structures. As such, the corporation becomes little more than a shell inside of which a hierarchy of individuals enter into free, if not highly complex, contracts (see Birch 2016 for an overview). Outside of that shell, the corporate hierarchy fades to irrelevance as designated actors negotiate transactions on behalf of the corporation with other firms and actors on 'the market'.

This said, the importance of Coase's theory goes beyond firm structures. The broader significance of this theory came in cleaving neo-classical market theory from actual market exchange. The cleavage was to have two fundamental implications for the trajectory of economics as a performative body of ideas. First, Coase's argument was that neo-classical pricing theory was actually in operation, even when there was no explicit or imminent market exchange (Davies 2014). Put differently, the implication of the theory was that even 'inside' of a firm, competitive and calculative market-like rationality was operating anytime a contract was established to 'bundle' parts of the production process. The implication of this is that the institutional coherence or integrity of a firm, or a market for that matter, are less important than the costs of the contractual arrangements that hold these institutions together. And, second, as those who followed him came to practice economics as a discipline, or perform it as a discursive governance formation, the argument obviated the need to investigate and theorise how firms, markets or economies actually operated on the ground. After all why would you need to study actual businesses and markets if all transactions take place on the head of a rationally maximising transactional pin?

In 1960 Coase, by then a member of the neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society, expanded the application of his transaction cost theory, this time applying it to the economy in general. By 1960 neoliberal economic thought had begun a new phase. At least amongst the Chicago School neoliberals, the ordo-liberal foundations that provided moral and technical limits to market order were giving way to a second wave of more radical ideas (Davies 2014), and with this Coase fit hand in glove.

In "The Problem of Social Costs" (1960), Coase argues that every institutional arrangement, including the negotiation and application of contracts, can be understood according to a question of transaction costs. Even the rearrangement of property rights, a sacred cow amongst many neoliberals, was little more than a question of costs. The important question for Coase in analysing the optimality of any commodity, contract, or institutional arrangement was not a question of history, morality, or justice, or even whether the state or a price mechanism was ordering society. Rather, the proper question was which arrangement will result in the greatest aggregate benefit for society, or what he called "social welfare".

Coase's paper is famous, or infamous, as an impulse for the development of the Chicago "law and economics" school. Where in ordo-liberal thought, economics was ultimately subject to the moral-juridical logic of the law, the Coase theorem suggested that the law should ultimately be subject to economic rationality (Davies 2014). As Davies argues, where in post-War ordo-liberalism "legalism" was "prior to economism" (77), in second wave neoliberalism, economism became the foundation for law, justice, and morality. This has a number of important implications, to which we will return below, but at their heart is a redefinition of welfare or wellbeing, not to mention statecraft, both of which became technocratic problems, first and foremost concerned with 'efficiency', and that could only be solved through techno-economic means.

Maybe the best-known example of the application of the Coase theorem is the "problem" of monopolies. Prior to the 1950s, most ordo/neoliberal thinkers argued for state intervention to break up corporate monopolies because they pre-empted the possibility of fair and just competition in the market. The implication of Coase's argument for corporate monopolies was twofold. First, the "corporation", monopoly or otherwise, could be reimagined as a set of competitive, private contracts, constantly subject to renegotiation including across the boundary of the corporate entity. In other words, monopoly corporations were ephemeral, so the best solution might simply be to wait for their destruction by entrepreneurs who would inevitably find ways to compete. Second, in the aggregate it was possible that monopolies could produce goods or services at a lower aggregate cost to the economy given that the cost of breaking them up and rearranging their property rights could be very expensive (see Christophers 2016: 227-240). This said, in the sphere of public goods, the Coase theorem fuelled arguments for breaking up inefficient and non-competitive state monopolies. The bottom line for post-Coase neoliberalism is that regardless of the power they wield, from the narrow perspective of transaction costs, monopolies are more or less irrelevant. The important question is whether any productive institution is cost efficient in the provision of "social welfare", whether that welfare takes the form of guns, butter, or higher education.

Similarly, Coase along with a handful of other Chicago School economists, "cut through the confusion" surrounding public goods (Mirowski 2011: 61) by simply denying that they existed in any coherent form. For post-Coase Chicago neoliberals, questions of rivalry, excludability, and externality, the properties typically employed to assess whether a good ought to be considered public or private, were less relevant than what they saw in the abstract as a clearer assessment technique: identifying the costs necessary to exchange the goods in question and/or rearrange contracts, property rights, and institutional structures to facilitate more efficient exchange. In the case that transaction costs could not be measured, one of the first moves would be to construct an economic model to make estimates. Not surprisingly, disaggregation, or unbundling of a group of property rights (e.g. a corporation or a complex commodity) at least in the terms of accounting is a necessary step in identifying and measuring costs (Mirowski 2011: 41-83). The question in relation to transaction costs is not about values or purpose, nor is it concerned with a distinction between public and private, or society and economy. Rather it is exclusively interested in efficiency.

Efficiency at all costs

So what does this all have to do with contemporary university restructuring? The answer lies in the failings of the Coase theorem. We are far from the first to observe that the Coase theorem is flawed (cf. Davies 2014). Along with several of the papers collected here, we want to argue against this type of reductive and economistic thinking. But of course this does not mean that the logic of a transaction cost approach, translated into arguments for unbundling are irrelevant. These are powerful ideas in their reduction, abstraction from reality, and simplistic elegance. And given their highly abstract nature, there are several not unexpected problems when they are applied to universities.

That said, with the exception of these initial comments, we are going to avoid a full scale criticism of neoliberalism, which can be found elsewhere (cf. Mirowski 2011, Davies 2014). In fact, as Davies (2014) demonstrates, a close interrogation of Coase's theory sheds new light on the broad implications of neoliberal governance. In the unavoidable absence of a *laissez faire* utopia, or "market society" as Polanyi (2001) called it, individual citizens, states, and civil society have to make judgements about where to expend public resources. Even Coase (1960) clearly understood this reality. But after 40 years of neoliberal dominance, at a time when the welfare state, government regulation and even juridical systems are subject to the logic of optimal economic outcomes, there is a diminishing set of external criteria by which to make 'public' decisions. There is a risk, as Couch (2019) describes in the case of the neoliberal reconstruction of higher education in Afghanistan, of a wholesale shift in the purpose of the university from social to economic outcomes, and to the production of private rather than public goods.

As a range of social theorists and philosophers have pointed out, *efficiency*, or the reduction of costs with the same outcomes, is hardly an end in itself (Muellerleile & Robertson 2018). Among other things, the gradual expulsion of social, ethical and political criteria to judge the success of a university has created the space for competitive metrics and other quantitative benchmarks that increasingly judge winners and losers in the higher education game. For Davies (2014), Coase's ideas help explain the importance of technocratic governance by prices and other quasi-price mechanisms like metrics that are based on discreet quantitative measurements. The papers in this special issue extend this observation to emphasise two ways in which these ideas are woven into the changes afoot in universities: predetermination and performative effect.

Coase has effectively ensured that there is no justification for *not* unbundling a university other than those related to economic efficiency. Lewis and Shore (2019: pg. 3) are accurate when they say "public universities are not corporations", but in a framework where every kind of institution producing any sort of socio-economic good, including the state, is judged according to the logic of transaction costs between rational, cost averse individuals, the distinction between corporations and universities is rendered largely irrelevant. At face value, the question that animates Barber, et al. is less whether education is a public or private good, and more whether breaking university 'monopolies' up into smaller pieces will result in greater "social welfare" in the aggregate. In this context, the structure of a university becomes a series of 'make or buy' problems. For instance, why employ permanent academic staff when temporary contracts offer more flexibility? In other words, why 'internalize' the contractual relationship with academic staff, when the costs are seemingly lower to externalize the relationship to the labour market? Thinking like this transforms political, long-term, and ethical questions into short-term economic, or just technocratic questions. They become questions to be answered by accountants and administrators rather than political actors, university leaders or professional academics who might appeal to the democratic purpose of the university as a social institution, a good that is weakly-defined, valued outside of market relations, and a source of, and rationale for, a raft of 'transaction costs'. As Bajenova (2019) demonstrates in this issue, private think tanks often with explicit policy goals are seemingly more *efficient* at delivering knowledge, at least in neo-classical economic terms where the qualities and values of knowledge are understood to be established and monetised at the point of transaction between buyer and seller. If the relationship between academic or scientific knowledge and policy is strictly transactional, little more than the clinical production and conveyance of knowledge from one party to another, then this makes complete sense. Why not employ a think tank, which is unburdened by costs and concerns like students and pedagogy, academic tenure, research ethics, or public accountability? It is far from coincidental, for instance, that the Barber et al. report, was published by a think tank, The Institute for Public Policy Research.

In short then, if the starting assumption is that the university is little more than an expensive bundle of private contracts between teachers, researchers, administrators, and students, loosely organized around a misguided mission related to a fuzzy concept like democracy, the solution of unbundling is predetermined. More to the point, as Lewis and Shore demonstrate, the grip exercised by Coase and others over our governmental imaginations, means that there is little need to demonstrate that unbundled universities are more efficient if the beginning assumption is that bundled universities are already *inefficient* in the terms of economic transactions. There is geographic variability in the processes of unbundling. It has clearly taken root in the U.K. and the rest of the English speaking world, but makes much less sense in a place like Germany where the social and public benefits of universities are more deeply engrained. That said, as they continue to advance a narrow economistic version of efficiency, global networks of neoliberal policy makers both transgress and take advantage of nation-state borders, so it would be naïve to imagine that this is only an 'Anglo' question.

Second, the suite of data, digital technologies and their application, and the expansionary logics embedded in the business of developing them and the expertise built around them, have created their own impetus for unbundling. In Bacevic's terms, they have altered the 'coding' that lends internal coherence to university assemblages, and thus they contribute to the de- and re-territorialization of those assemblages. If digital technologies have proven effective at anything, it is the disaggregation of institutions, social relations, and even bodies into smaller, discernible units that can be measured, surveilled, and of course marketed. Komljenovic (2019) in this issue provides a thorough examination of how this is happening to students, their skills sets, and the broader labour market. Furthermore, both Komljenovic (2019) and Bacevic (2019) make the crucial point that digital technologies do not 'just' dis-assemble the university. They also re-assemble it with a mix of new flows of data and digital firms. In Coasian terms, digital technologies demand reorganization of the contracts and property relations of the university to produce knowledge-related commodities in a more efficient manner. In the terms of those seeking to extract platform rents and/or profit from market making, these highly abstract, but seemingly precise metrics and technologies both facilitate unbundling and make it more attractive.

Put another way, these 'forces' of predetermination and performativity are contributing directly to the production of a post-political world. However, they are neither disembodied nor disembedded, and the technocratic imagination is far from apolitical. The Barber et al.

document, the competition for influence between universities and think tanks in Brussels, and the adoption by universities themselves of digital technologies, metrics, and learning management systems, are all tightly bound up in capitalist political economy. Their architects are self-interested and their projects are political. Producing a technocratic university (or world) is a deeply political act that reallocates resources, opportunities and privilege, even before any consideration is made of the self-interests and calculated analytical flaws that provide the substance of 'An avalanche is coming'. As Lewis and Shore insist, it is not enough to take Barber et al.'s appeal to 'social welfare' in the form of efficiency at face value. Rather, if we recognise the free market to be the fantasy that it is (Žižek 1999; Dean 2003; Clarke 2012; Brown 2015), then Coase appears as a fantasist in a drama where the purpose of the public university is very much the plot, in both political and economic terms. Each of the papers that follow address this concern, which Newfield nails home in his commentary with the urgency and forthrightness required to contest the remaking of the university as an agent of postpolitics.

Overview of the papers

The papers collected here approach these problems from a variety of perspectives, from different parts of the world, from the empirical to theoretical, and from objective to normative. (Un)bundling and (dis)assembly are considered in every paper, although this is not the dominant theme of all six.

Lewis and Shore meet unbundling head-on with an explicit engagement with what they see as a process of economisation or the ways that "organisations are disassembled, monetised, repurposed and recast as economic enterprises". In a critical reading of a series of ideologically driven reports, they expose the disturbing analysis-free zone that constitutes the unbundling argument. In two of the cases, the reports' authors have a for-profit interest in unbundling. In effect the reports are "advocating worlds that they and their clients are already bringing into being" (6). This helps explain why, as Lewis and Shore emphasise, these reports offer close to zero evidence of why unbundling is necessary and beneficial. Rather, the reports are an up-close look at what in effect is a naked attempt to prepare the ground for a new round of university privatization in New Zealand and the U.K. This is more than an argument against neoliberal governance. Lewis and Shore end their paper with a set of implications of what unbundling makes possible. That is, a(nother) round of marketization and financialization through the atomizing of academic units and services, and by laying the groundwork for "rebundling…led by financialised capital and new sets of financial instruments."

Komljenovic picks up the argument by providing a remarkably detailed look at the practice of labour 'market making' in the brave new world of employability mandates and data-driven credentialing. Her subject is the platform firm LinkedIn, the wholly owned Microsoft subsidiary that intends to restructure how skills are acquired, categorized, measured, and allocated to capital. Not surprisingly, a big part of the strategy is to assess individual universities' effectiveness in delivering skills through a process of what she calls "qualification altmetrics". This is a process of disaggregating education and learning into new skill categories that LinkedIn can assess and measure, and maybe not surprisingly, teach through their recently acquired online training sub-platform, Lynda. Taking advantage of positive "network effects", LinkedIn lures in universities and students alike employing a 'freemium' model. In an increasingly competitive 'market' amongst universities for undergraduate students, and increasingly competitive labour markets for university graduates, Komljenovic shows how both "cannot afford not to be involved with the platform."

Couch offers perhaps the starkest example of re-assembly of universities and the higher education sector in war-torn Afghanistan. Higher education was in tatters following two decades of invasion, war, and concomitant institutional decline, and finally the U.S.-led invasion in 2001-

2. In the face of this "violent disintegration" of the university system, Couch draws on Naomi Klein's notion of "disaster capitalism" to show how a starkly economistic version of higher education dominated the re-assemblage of universities through the 2000s. Under the influence of global policy networks, when reconstruction efforts began in 2002 the Afghani state adopted neoliberal approach to the rebuilding program. 'Outside' influence was hardly something new for the Afghanis, but in the 2000s, the dominant understanding of the purpose of higher education was to fuel the economy with broader concerns related to social justice or national unity subordinated. With little to no regulation in the post-conflict policy arena, there was an explosion of private providers offering dubious quality education, but nevertheless filling the mandate to construct a 'knowledge economy' by endowing young Afghanis with human capital. While Afghanistan may be an acute example, Couch provides a cautionary tale of the risks involved with assuming that the only function of universities is to serve as a means for economic ends.

In the context of the declining legitimacy of conventionally produced academic research, Bajenova analyses the growth of think thanks in the European Union. These institutions have grown in number and influence in symbiosis with the EU itself over the last fifty years, and as Bajanova demonstrates, are just as influential on day to day policy as universities and their researchers. How did this happen? For Bajenova, think tanks have made a concerted effort in the social field of academic knowledge production to build up various forms of soft capital including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Crucially, think tanks emulate scientific expertise, but without the bureaucratic fetters of university administration, or the long term commitments of basic research. Think tanks have worked hard to cultivate credibility, in particular by distinguishing themselves from lobbyists by emphasizing their technical expertise and independence. Transparency is the answer to the charge of bias—yes, they may tend to support particular political parties, but at least they are open about it, in contrast to academics and universities who hide behind false objectivity. While characterising the unbundling of universities is not Bajanova's point, her research clearly demonstrates the reassemblage of the landscape of policy expertise at a time when elite academic influence on the state may be on the wane. Think tanks are responsive, nimble, and *in situ* with policy makers in a way that university researchers typically are not—and justifiably may not want to be. Nevertheless universities and academics ought to take seriously these potential competitors in the field of knowledge production.

Bacevic provides the most theoretical engagement of the collection. The paper argues for a relational conception of the university and explains how assemblage theory can produce a more radical rethinking of contemporary change in universities. Bacevic challenges the value of unbundling as an analytical framework, arguing that it relies on an essentialized university that was never there to begin with. She draws on theorists such as Deleuze & Guattari, Callon, Latour, Harman, and particularly DeLanda, and in doing so, cultivates a productive tension with the other papers in the collection. She argues that universities have always been entangled with "state, space, and territory in the context of global capitalism" and have thus always been impermanent institutions in a constant state of (re)assemblage with other social formations. As such, Bacevic argues that a "new political economy" of higher education must "shift attention to the relational nature of knowledge production". Rather than focus attention on what has been (or is assumed to have been) unbundled, she calls on critics to reimagine the boundaries of the university, not least in recognising its capacities to enliven positive change.

Newfield wraps up the collection with a level-headed reflection where he both synthesizes the previous papers and offers a friendly corrective to the critical theme of the special issue. He reinforces the necessity of a nonessentialzing analytical approach to the university—considering thoughtfully that it never was never a purely autonomous institution. At the same time, he underlines the importance of criticism of the strong discourse of unbundling, not least because of the "institutional power" of its advocates. Newfield suggests that policy makers considering the intentional disaggregation of universities ought to be compelled to answer three straightforward questions related to the purported benefits of unbundling. We will not repeat them here (see pg. XX). At the same time Newfield implores critics of university privatization and digitalization to take caution to not reinforce the inevitability of these efforts. Put differently, Newfield urges critics of unbundling to take contingency or uncertainty more seriously suggesting that future research in this area converts "apparent drivers into uncertainties" with the anticipated effect of "treating the higher education system as an open space of contestation" rather than one headed toward an inevitable closure. In short, Newfield offers up a view of the contemporary university as a site where Coasian predetermination and performativity might be resisted, and a counter-hegemonic production of knowledge might be cultivated.

Conclusion: The Unbounded University?

In closing, we return to the overarching theme of these papers, which is relatively simple. A project of unbundling or disassembling the university, especially one driven from 'above', ought to be subject to ongoing criticism. And this criticism should begin by rejecting the assumption that higher education is a series of economic transactions that ought to be subject to a technocratic quest to eliminate inefficiencies. The papers collected here (esp. Bacevic) also demonstrate that there is little value in assuming the opposite—that universities have clear and established boundaries that are beyond reproach. This said, the concrete realities of contemporary unbundling can only be understood within the context of neoliberal capitalism where rationalization and economic efficiency are ends in themselves, and the social or political value of the university is subordinated.

As Coase suggested, unbundling often requires the rearrangement of property rights, but where boundaries and property rights are not clear, as with public or collective goods, they must be established. Successful unbundling will require that these rights are negotiated and formalized. In other words, the unbundling of public universities will predictably include processes of bounding, which is, as Lewis and Shore point out, typically a precursor to privatization and marketization. The transaction cost theory is clear on this matter. Whether inside a firm or not, it assumes anything *could* be traded in a market given the right contractual rearrangements. In the UK university sector, there is nothing surprising here. The imagination of the *eventual* efficient distribution of scarce higher education resources, or what Christophers (2019) calls the "allusive market", is explicit in government discourse, and looms over the future of all universities. At the same time, the 'markets' that are constantly invoked by neoliberal politicians and technocrats are highly *elusive*, for many of the reasons that Marginson (2013) has pointed out. That is, it is very likely impossible to construct proper neoliberal price mechanisms in higher education exactly *because* the various components of university life cannot be disaggregated without doing great violence to them, and thus obviating their usefulness.

Even if true capitalist markets in higher education are impossible (ibid.), this seems to be only a slight obstacle to constant attempts to inject more competition into the university sector. But at what cost? What if, in other words, the mechanisms designed to generate efficiency are actually more expensive than the purported inefficiencies they are designed to alleviate? We suspect that if it was possible, a truly empirical Coasian analysis of neoliberal efforts to disassemble and reassemble universities would demonstrate that it is a highly inefficient and damaging process. This is after all one of the enduring lessons from Coase—that 'free' markets are not free, but in fact expensive to produce and maintain. Coincidentally, beyond the manifold complexities of an empirical study that test this hypothesis, one of the reasons it is unlikely to happen is that to a great extent neoliberal dogma deems social, political, and public benefits as illegitimate, and therefore not worth measuring. The implication might be a tautology, but it is still worth stating: if a project of restructuring universities began with a concern for social as opposed to economic[6] costs and 'efficiencies', or public as opposed to private benefits, it would likely produce quite different outcomes.

Finally, the theory of transaction costs has at least two effects related to boundaries, both of which we believe are damaging to the public university. The first is that a fluid and boundless university that is open to integration with the public is disallowed because those relationships cannot be 'properly' registered as private, contractual, transactional relations. Second, at the same time, the remarkably broad application of the Coase theorum means that only 'economic' boundaries are legitimate. As such, in this way of thinking, there is no legitimate way to protect the public university from incursions from capitalist markets. Whether universities ought to hold monopolies on credentialing for instance, is up for debate. But if the starting assumption is that universities exist only to produce credentials, and university credentials are only private economic goods attained through a market like transaction, the debate has been finished before it begins. We believe any project of unbundling must be subject to this kind of critique, and the papers collected here take a small step in that direction.

Acknowledgements

We thank the European Union via the FP7 Marie Sklodowska Curie Actions scheme for funding the project from which these papers emerged. We also thank Janja Komljenovic for helpful suggestions on a previous draft, and with the usual caveats.

References

Bacevic, J. (2019): "With or without U? Assemblage theory and (de)territorialising the university", *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1498323

Bajenova, T. (2019): "Rescaling expertise in EU policy-making: European think tanks and their reliance on symbolic, political and network capital", *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1540926

Barber, M., Donnelly, K., and Rizvi, S. (2013) "An Avalanche is Coming. Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead", London: Institute for Public Policy Research (March 2013). http://www.studynet2.herts.ac.uk/intranet/lti.nsf/0/684431DD8106AF1680257B560052BCCC/$FILE/avalanche-is-coming_Mar2013_10432.pdf

Birch, K. (2016) "Market vs. contract? The implications of contractual theories of corporate governance to the analysis of neoliberalism", *ephemera: theory & politics in organization,* 16(1)

Brown, W., 2015. *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Mit Press.

[6] Here we realise that we are depending on a flawed binary distinction between society and economy, which could among other things have the effect of reproducing the very market-like relations we are trying to criticize (cf. Krippner et al 2004). In fact, while we appreciate Marginson's (2013) argument that a "bona fide" capitalist market in higher education is likely impossible, market-like relations and competition are clearly present in the higher education sector. The point is that denying the existence of a market because it does not conform to neo-classical economic theory assumes a separation of economic from social relations, which makes it more difficult to understand how social relations can become increasingly or incrementally marketized over time.

Carroll, G. R., & Teece, D. J. (eds.) (1999) *Firms, markets, and hierarchies : The transaction cost economics perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Christophers, B. (2016) *The Great Leveler: Capitalism and Competition in the Court of Law*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Christophers, B. (2019) "The allusive market: insurance of flood risk in neoliberal Britain", *Economy and Society,* available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2018.1547494

Clarke, M. (2012) "The (absent) politics of neo-liberal education policy,*Critical Studies in Education"*, 53 (3): 297-310.

Coase, R.H. (1937) "The Nature of the Firm" *Economica*, New Series, Vol. 4, No. 16., pp. 386-405.

Coase, R.H. (1960) "The Problem of Social Cost" *The Journal of Law and Economics*, vol. 3

Collini, S. (2017) *Speaking of Universities*, Brooklyn: Verso

Couch, D. (2019) "The policy reassembly of Afghanistan's higher education System", *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1523708

Davies, W. (2014) *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, London: Sage.

Dean, J., 2008. Enjoying neoliberalism. *Cultural Politics*, *4*(1), pp.47-72.

Komljenovic, J. (2019) "Linkedin, platforming labour, and the new employability mandate for universities", Globalisation, Societies and Education, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1500275

Komljenovic, J. and Robertson S.L. (2016) "The Dynamics of 'Market-Making' in Higher Education." *Journal of Education Policy* 31 (5): 622–36.

Krippner, G. et al. (2004) "Polanyi Symposium: a conversation on embeddedness" *Socio-Economic Review*, 2: 109-135

Lewis, N. & Shore, C. (2019) "From unbundling to market making: reimagining, reassembling and reinventing the public university", *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1524287

Mann, G. (2013) *Disassembly Required: A Field Guide to Actually Existing Capitalism*, Oakland, CA: AK Press

Marginson, S. (2013) "The impossibility of capitalist markets in higher education", *Journal of Education Policy*, 28:3, 353-370

McCowan, T. 2017. "Higher Education, Unbundling, and the end of the University as We Know It." *Oxford Review of Education* 43 (6): 733–748.

Mirwoski, P. (2011) *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Mouffe, C. (2018) *For a Left Populism*, Brooklyn: Verso

Muellerleile, C. & Robertson, S.L. (2018) "Digital Weberianism: Bureaucracy, Information, and the Techno-rationality of Neoliberal Capitalism", *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*

Newfield, C. (2019) "Unbundling the Knowledge Economy", to be included in this issue of *Globalisation, Societies and Education*

Robertson, S. L., and J. Komljenovic. 2016. "Unbundling and Making Higher Education Markets." In *World Yearbook in Education*: *Global Education Industry*, edited by A. Verger, C. Lubienski, and G. Steiner-Kamsi, 211–227, London: Routledge.

Walker, R. (1988) "The Geographic Organization of Production Systems" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol 6

Žižek 1999 *The Ticklish Subject*. London: Verso
.