

TIMO JÜTTEN

SCIENCE FOR SALE

Review of: Hans Radder (ed.) (2010) *The Commodification of Academic Research*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 360p.

Krisis, 2011, Issue 2

www.krisis.eu

It is often said that a book's publication is timely, and this may be more or less true. In the case of Hans Radder's excellent collection on the commodification of academic research it is definitely true. Universities across Europe and the US face pressures of commercialization that go beyond anything that they have experienced before and that transform the nature of academic research and scientific knowledge themselves. As Radder points out in his introductory chapter, commodification, considered as a social development, is much broader than commercialization, that is, the familiar pursuit of profit through the sale of academic expertise and its results: 'Academic commodification means that all kinds of scientific activities and their results are predominantly interpreted and assessed on the basis of economic criteria.' (4) This development transforms the nature of research and knowledge, because commodified academic research is organised on the basis of different values, norms and procedures from

traditional academic research, and because commodified knowledge differs from traditional forms of scientific knowledge in terms of accessibility, communicability and usability. In fact, there are at least three independent but closely related worries about the commodification of academic research: one concerns the epistemic independence of science, a second concerns its ethical status, and a third its social purposes.

The fourteen contributors to this volume address all three worries, though not everyone addresses all of them, and not everyone agrees on what exactly is worrying about commodification. I will not be able to do justice to all of the papers, and therefore I have decided to focus on the papers that I found most thought provoking. However, I should stress that all contributions contain valuable, original material and are worth reading (including some fascinating historical papers, such as Henk van der Belt's 'Robert Merton, Intellectual Property, and Open Science' and Steve Fuller's 'Capitalism and Knowledge').

As someone who came to this volume with a general interest in commodification, I found it fascinating how the language of corruption pervades many of the papers, despite the fact that only one paper explicitly discusses the distinction between coercion and corruption approaches to commodification (Mark B. Brown's 'Coercion, Corruption, and Politics in the Commodification of Academic Science'). This distinction, which goes back to Michael Sandel's 1998 Tanner Lectures, suggests that commodification may be morally wrong, because it coerces people into making particular choices, or because it corrupts a particular good or social practice. In the recent literature the intuitively appealing corruption argument has come under attack for a number of reasons. Its most problematic aspect is that it presupposes collective agreement on the social meaning of the good under consideration. Thus the argument may be that sex is corrupted in prostitution, because sex is a shared human good that should be exchanged as a gift, rather than bought and sold for money. The problem with this argument is that it presupposes collective agreement about the social meaning of sex, which is unlikely to obtain in any liberal society, and therefore may not be claimed by the state in support of legislation. Brown advances a similar argument against the corruption objection to the commodification of academic research (262–67). He concedes that

there are a number of plausible ways of demarcating the specificity of science as a social practice or institution that is governed by its own standards of excellence, and which may be corrupted if commodified. The problem, he argues, is that

[P]hilosophers, sociologists, and other scholars concerned about commodification cannot, by themselves, establish societal consensus on the meanings of social goods, including academic research. They also lack political authority to dictate which exchanges should be blocked or allowed. Scholarly arguments regarding the appropriate relationship between science and commerce, therefore, are best understood as contributions to processes of public deliberation and decision making. They should not be used to shortcut such processes.' (266–67)

Brown's preferred solution to this problem is a republican one. He argues that universities have multiple purposes, including 'not only the production of scientific knowledge, as proponents of the corruption argument tend to assume, but the provision of knowledge, education, and other social goods in a context of collective self-governance' (271). So understood, commodification first and foremost threatens self-governance, including the governance of commodification. Successful self-governance, then, is a self-governance that protects itself by protecting the university from a commodification that undermines its ability to function as a self-governing community. Of course, the dilemma of republican self-governance, as Brown recognises, is the possibility of bad self-governance, where faculties endorse or accede to commercial influence of research that undermines their long-term interests. And, surely, philosophers can say something about the sort of influence that is almost certainly a corruption of academic research (or education for that matter) on any reasonable understanding.

To see this, consider some of the other contributions to this collection. Several contributors stress that there are at least two ways in which the commodification of academic research corrupts it. On the one hand, there are the notorious cases where individual corporations have sought to gain undue influence on the practice of academic research, the research questions that were pursued, the data that was collected, the way it was

analysed, and how much of it was published. Most of these cases involve pharmaceutical or biotechnological research, where a lot of money is riding on getting the right results, though not necessarily the true ones. On the other hand, there are the 'subtle and pervasive changes underway in the *culture* of the academy', as Daniel Lee Kleinman puts it in his contribution ('The Commercialization of Academic Culture and the Future of the Academy', 25). In particular, Kleinman suggests that academic research mimics industrial research and that universities begin to foster an entrepreneurial research culture that focuses on research that can be patented and then commercially exploited.

Kleinman warns us not to overstate the importance of science scandals, because they detract attention from the more covert shifts in academic culture that undermine academic autonomy. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to point to some extreme cases, where corruption has taken place either because scientists are willing to betray their profession for money, or where regulatory regimes fail to protect citizens from acute danger due to the massive power yielded by pharmaceutical lobbyists. Thus David Resnik ('Financial Interests and the Norms of Academic Science') describes five common practices in which academic norms are corrupted by financial interest: skewing the publication record, cooking the data, misconduct and fraud, spinning the data, and inappropriate authorship (75–84). An example of cooking the data may be a pharmaceutical company that designs a clinical trial for one of its products but omits to test for a particular side effect which it suspects the product to have. An often-cited example of spinning the data is that of a panel convened by the National Institute of Health to consider the threshold for the prescriptions of cholesterol-lowering drugs (statins). The panel recommended lowering the threshold so as to greatly increase the number of people eligible for treatment, but the recommendation was tainted by the fact that eight of nine panel members had undisclosed financial relationships with statin manufacturers.

James Robert Brown ('One-Shot Science') sees the underlying problem of these science scandals in randomised clinical trials, the gold standard of evidence-based medicine, in situations where these trials are carried out by pharmaceutical companies with massive financial interests in their out-

comes, and where they are unlikely to be replicated by others due to prohibitive costs. He shows convincingly that such trials are frequently subject to the manipulations discussed in the previous paragraph, and that the very nature of ‘one-shot science’ makes it much harder to objectively evaluate the real efficacy of new drugs. Moreover, given that new drugs are usually compared to placebos, rather than to existing alternatives, relative improvements are very hard to determine. In summary, Brown suggests that

‘It is hard to imagine a more poorly constructed regulatory system than the current one in place in the United States. It leads one to think that U.S. lawmakers are either a pack of fools or as corrupt as the pharmaceutical companies who lavishly lobby them. There is ample evidence for either conclusion.’ (102)

Brown suggests that the only viable alternative to the current system is to place responsibility for randomised clinical trials into public hands, but his brazen criticism of the current system puts the finger on a problem that also pertains to Kleinman’s worry about the cultural change in the academy more generally. The corruption of academic research through commodification is not merely an issue of research ethics, as important as that is. Rather, the question is how commodification, as a social development, is driven by a wider ideology of the market that persists even where the inefficacy and outright failure of the market has been demonstrated. Here, the relationship between the commodification of academic research, commodification as a worldview, and the scope of possible resistance to commodification in the academy and beyond it is at issue, and this issue has yet to be discussed in a comprehensive theory of commodification.

In the meantime Albert Musschenga, Wim van der Steen and Vincent Ho (‘The Business of Drug Research’) discuss a fascinating example of a covert shift in academic culture brought about by commodification. They examine the way in which psychiatry has been shaped as a biological science that favours medication as the typical response to psychopathology and downplays sociological and ecological factors in the etiology of conditions such as schizophrenia and depression. For example, they point out that, in

2005, 746,000 persons in the Netherlands were treated with antidepressants, at a cost of €162 million (118). This is a staggering percentage of the Dutch population, and the authors suggest that the medicalization of psychological problems is driven by the pharmaceutical industry and, more generally, by the commodification of science. In particular, they criticise the shift to randomised clinical trials in the determination of drug efficacy, because these trials do not investigate the very nutritional, environmental and social bases of mental problems whose importance is increasingly recognised by practitioners. The problem, of course, is that it is not in the interest of pharmaceutical companies or scientists involved in expensive medical trials to find out about alternative treatments of mental problems through improved nutrition or environmental changes (for example, light). The research agenda of psychiatry as a science is dictated by its social organisation as a commodified science.

What can be done to safeguard the independence of science under pressure from commodification? Several contributors urge a return to Mertonian values. Though, as Hans Radder points out (‘Mertonian Values, Scientific Norms, and the Commodification of Academic Research’), it won’t be enough to merely reiterate Merton’s norms or to appeal to individual scientists. Rather, Merton’s famous terminology (universalism, communism, disinterestedness and organised scepticism) expresses values that need to be expressed in more specific scientific norms, and these values ought to be upheld not only by individual scientists, but also by the scientific institutions which shape the incentive structures of science funding. Radder also shows that a serious commitment to such a neo-Mertonian approach is incompatible with current patenting practices. If this is right, then the inclusion of patents as indicators of achievement for European Research council founding applications, for example, is clearly a breach of Mertonian values (250).

Clearly, what is needed is a principled discussion about the social purposes of science that can inform policy-making and lay down norms governing scientific inquiry threatened by commodification. Some authors contribute to this discussion (for example, James Robert Brown, Hans Radder, and also Harry Kunneman’s ‘Viable Alternatives for Commercialized Science’), but, in my view, this is the area where much more work needs to

be done. Nevertheless, Radder's collection is an excellent starting point and compulsory reading for anyone remotely interested in commodification.

Timo Jütten is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Essex. His research interests are in critical theory, political philosophy and ethics, and his current project is on commodification and the moral limits of markets. He has published articles in the *European Journal of Philosophy*, *Inquiry* and *The International Journal of Philosophical Studies*.

 De Creative Commons Licentie is van toepassing op dit artikel (Naamsvermelding-Niet-commercieel 3.0). Zie <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl> voor meer informatie.