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‘Freedom and Autonomy in the University Enterprise’

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores notions of enterprise as an instance of organizational change within university business schools, using a theoretical approach drawn from the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their concept of articulatory practice is useful for examining the management of knowledge workers across multiple levels of discourse, including policy, practice and processes of identification. Specifically, the paper investigates the articulation of enterprise within Government policy on higher education, management practices of directing, funding, measuring and regulating the activities of faculty in ways that seek to promote enterprise, as well as demonstrating how agents can resist attempts at top-down managerial control through processes of self-identification.

Design/methodology/approach – An empirical study consisting of an analysis of government reports on higher education along with 65 interviews conducted at six UK research-led business schools.

Findings – At the level of Government policy, the university is recast as an enterprise within a competitive marketplace where the ‘entrepreneurial academic’ who commercializes research becomes the role model. However, management practices and identity processes amongst faculty reveal inconsistencies within the articulation of the university enterprise, to the extent that this idealised identity is marginalised within research-led business schools in the UK.

Originality/Value – The theoretical approach captures the dynamism of hegemonic projects across multiple levels, from policymaking to management practice and the constitution of identity. Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony highlights mechanisms of control, while their assumption of radical contingency illuminates dynamics of resistance.

Introduction

Academics need not venture far from their campuses to better understand the management of knowledge workers during periods of organizational change. Universities meet the most basic definition of knowledge-intensive firm given that the work conducted draws primarily on mental abilities rather than craft or physical strength and the work is performed by well-educated, qualified employees who expect high levels of autonomy and invest heavily in their work identity (Alvesson, 1991; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). It is puzzling therefore, that the literature on knowledge intensive firms has tended to look elsewhere for its empirical work, whether that be accountants (Grey, 1998), management consultants (Fincham, 1999), high tech workers (Kunda, 1992) or the creative minds of advertising (Alvesson, 1994).

The neglect of academic labour as an instance of knowledge work would appear to lie in the association of knowledge work with a particular form of organisational structure – the ‘post-bureaucracy’ (Heckscher, 1994). Functional approaches to career, control and commitment stress the importance of rules and standardised procedures in the form of career planning, targets, incentives, monitoring and rewards. These traditional control mechanisms are held to have less purchase in knowledge-intensive firms which are increasingly ‘post-bureaucratic’ in their organisation, driven by market demands for flexibility. ‘Post-bureaucracy’ is not a label readily applied to even the most lean and flexible academic institution, yet academics are undoubtedly knowledge workers who have, in Western democracies at least, historically enjoyed considerable autonomy, embodied in the notion of academic freedom.

Higher education is an intriguing sector for studying the management of knowledge workers because of Government initiatives to make universities more 'enterprising'. Paradoxically, freedom and autonomy are nodal points in enterprise discourse (Storey, Salaman & Platman, 2005), yet precisely these values are seen to be threatened by the change to make universities more closely resemble private sector organizations (Slaughter, 1988; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Academic freedom, for instance, has become a target of managerial and government agencies who perceive a lack of accountability in the phrase and regard it as a symbol of resistance against managerialism (Taylor et al, 1998). Unsurprisingly, the literature on academic freedom is generally pessimistic about its future in an increasingly professionalised and commodified higher education sector (e.g. Soley, 1996; Parker & Jary, 2002). There is acute tension, therefore, surrounding the nature of academic work as knowledge work and the desire by these agencies to foster an enterprise culture within the academy.

In addition to presenting the findings of an empirical study of UK research-led business schools, this paper seeks to make a theoretical contribution to discourse approaches for analysing organizational change. The study of discourse has become widespread within organization studies but there is criticism that the preoccupation with language has gone too far, to the extent that all that matters is talk and text (Down & Reveley, 2004). In recent times, it has been argued that to understand identity processes in organisation we must look 'beyond' discourse. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) draw a distinction between discourse, which they define as explicit language use, and a range of strategic and symbolic mechanisms, many of which have

a material existence as part of the work process. Motivated by similar concerns, Karreman and Alvesson (2004) distinguish between a technocratic layer of structural elements such as hierarchies, career paths and work methodologies from a socio-ideological layer which concerns identity and identification.

This paper acknowledges the importance of studying objects and action as well as text. It proposes that we stick with discourse, but via an expanded definition drawn from the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), which has begun to make an impact within organization studies (Bridgman & Willmott, 2006; Willmott, 2005). For Laclau and Mouffe discourse is not reduced to text, nor seen as distinct from structures and practices. Rather, discourse is “an articulatory practice which constitutes and organises social relations” (2001, p.96). Specifically, this paper investigates enterprise discourse as a set of hegemonic articulatory practices which constitute objects (e.g. university), practices (e.g. promotion), identities (e.g. academics) and the ways in which relations of career, control and commitment are organised.

The outline of the paper is as follows. In the next section, key contributions to the literature on enterprise are reviewed, followed by a brief introduction to Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory. Following that is a presentation of the empirical study of UK research-led business schools. In the final section, the relevance of the study for the management of knowledge workers is considered.

Conceptualising enterprise

Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) seminal contribution highlights the discourse of enterprise as being behind a range of organizational reforms that replaces organizational regulation with market regulation. Enterprise discourse is seen as a totalising and individualising economic rationality, where 'patients', 'passengers' and 'pupils' are reconstructed as 'customers'. Enterprise discourse has become hegemonic to the extent that even those cynical of its claims inevitably reproduce it in daily life. Fournier and Grey (1999) argue that by stressing the totalising effects of enterprise discourse on subjectivity Du Gay "fail[s] to account, or even allow, for resistance or alternatives to enterprise" (p.117). Rather than implying that enterprise discourse is the only discursive resource on which employees' identities will be configured, Fournier and Grey prefer to see enterprise as one discourse amongst others.

Early conceptions of enterprise discourse are also criticised for being insensitive to material concerns. Du Gay (1996) claims it has achieved hegemony over other organizational discourses, yet also acknowledges evidence from empirical research which suggests that the discourse, and its associated focus on 'excellence' is *not* being adopted in most organizations. According to Newton (1998), Du Gay acknowledges these material circumstances, but sees no need to modify his argument about the salience of enterprise discourse, whatever the empirical data might suggest. What is needed, argues Newton, is "an understanding of subjectivity and organization which attends to agency and 'materialism' yet avoids dualism, essentialism and reductionism" (p.441).

Recent approaches to understanding enterprise have focused on identity and identity processes. In their study of freelance and contract workers in the media, Storey et al (2005) examine the 'enterprising self' from the perspective of worker responses to systemic attempts to see themselves as enterprising subjects. They found that workers "did not merely absorb passively the discourses and practices to which they were exposed" (p.1050) but aspired to some qualities of enterprise while criticising others and developed a range of enterprising strategies to counter their weak market position.

In sum, the literature shows a movement away from seeing enterprise discourse in a somewhat deterministic fashion as a project that is imposed on workers from above, towards an understanding that is attentive to agency and the possibilities of resistance. What is needed is a theoretical approach that is sensitive to structure without being deterministic and that is also sensitive to agency and the possibilities of resistance, without succumbing to voluntarism.

The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe makes a potentially valuable contribution to this goal with their distinctive social ontology that distinguishes it from other forms of discourse approaches that have made an impact within organization studies, such as Foucauldian analysis and critical discourse analysis, which is based on a critical realist ontology (Fairclough, 2003)¹. In discourse theory, all objects and practices are discursively constituted and therefore meaningful (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). This is not an idealist claim that extra-discursive reality does not exist, as critics of discourse theory, such as Geras (1987) have claimed. Instead, it dissolves the distinction between being (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) by claiming that while objects have an existence external to discourse, our knowledge, or understanding of

them, depends on the structuring of a discursive field. For example, the business school, including its buildings, facilities and programmes of study, exists external to discourse, but our understanding of what the business school 'is' – its distinctive identity – is rendered discursively. In asserting the materiality of discourse, Laclau states that "it is not that discourse produces some kind of material effect, but the material act of producing it is what discourse is" (Bhaskar & Laclau, 1998, p.13). From this perspective, attention is focused on the ways in which the material and the social are articulated within discourses that establish relations between them (Bridgman & Willmott, 2006).

Another key ontological assumption of discourse theory is the radical contingency of all objects and identities, which draws our attention towards the operation of hegemonic discourses such as enterprise. While these projects offer a partial fixation of meaning, they are penetrated by a radical contingency that prevents closure or totalisation, since they rely on discursive exteriors that partially constitute and therefore potentially subvert them. This 'undecidability' of the structure becomes evident in moments of dislocation, which induces an identity crisis for the subject and 'compels' the subject to act in order to restore or affirm a recognisable sense of identity through identification with discourses (Laclau, 1990). This insight that identities and practices are ultimately contingent facilitates an analysis of the ways in which subjects can resist the totalising efforts of hegemonic discourses.

Methodology

What then, are the implications of this definition of discourse for doing discourse analysis? The assumption of radical contingency means that while discourses might

appear as natural and uncontested, contingency remains within any social practice. Any discursive articulation is an incomplete system of meaning which brings together elements that have inconsistencies when linked together. The task of the analyst, therefore, is to examine not only how discursive articulations come to appear as natural, but also to highlight the contingent elements of social practices and ways in which those moments provide opportunities for political contestation and transformation.

According to Storey et al (2005), it is vital to consider enterprise and its relationship to identity from multiple levels – from top-down attempts to define identity, through to individuals' self-identification with these narratives. However, Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) note the general failure of discourse approaches to 'climb the ladder of discourse' – to go from local encounters with talk and text to large-scale discourses that have effects in constituting the social world. Laclau and Mouffe's broad conception of discourse is useful here, incorporating an analysis of actual language use (talk and text), strategic and symbolic resources, actions, behaviour as well as 'grand' discourses such as enterprise. This paper, in considering issues of career, control and commitment in higher education, involves an examination of policymaking at government level, managerial efforts to create an enterprise culture within the business school, and the ways in which employees identify with and/or resist such efforts.

The data set includes archival and interview data, the former consisting of government reports and 'white papers' on higher education. In addition, a total of 65 interviews were conducted at six research-led UK business schools. The study set out to explore

issues around academic freedom in the changing context of contemporary higher education, especially that notion that the university has a democratic function as a source of social criticism. Respondents were those with significant interactions with external audiences, such as practitioners, policymakers, journalists and think-tanks, since it was believed that in these interactions the tensions around academic freedom would be most acute. The choice of schools reflects a mix of factors, including size, the proportion of resource income from external sources (industry, commerce and public corporations) and geographic location. Within each of the six schools a diversity of respondents were sought on categories of age, gender, specialist field, faculty rank and type of external engagement.

The findings are presented in the following four sections. The first looks at the constitution of the university enterprise within Government policy documents, while the second highlights contradictions within the articulation of enterprise discourse at the level of management practice. The third section considers implications of enterprise for academic freedom and autonomy, while the final section explores identity processes and illustrates possibilities of resistance.

Policymakers' construction of the university enterprise

The construction of the university as an enterprise is hegemonic within UK government policy documents. In a familiar narrative, higher education becomes a “global business” (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p.13) where only the fittest universities will survive. Universities must “play a central role as dynamos of growth” in a knowledge-economy but “they will only fulfil that mission if they match

excellence in research and teaching with innovation and imagination in commercialising research” (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000, p.27).

Of particular relevance to issues around the management of career, control and commitment within universities is the mistrust of traditional collegial governance structures. The 2003 Lambert Review on Business-University Collaboration criticises collegial and collective forms of management for being slow and risk-averse, in contrast with the “strong executive structures” of private sector models (Lambert, 2003, p.6). Lambert acknowledges that while universities are “not businesses”, they “need to be business-like in the way they manage their affairs” (p.14). In this articulation, collegiality is incompatible with a commercially focused university, where more autocratic, executive styles are needed in an environment of rapid change. Academics might be knowledge workers, but they are not to be afforded the autonomy and respect for their professional expertise which is supposedly characteristic of knowledge-intensive firms.

Lambert notes a change in organizational culture “with many universities casting off their ivory tower image and playing a much more active role in the regional and national economy” (p.3). In this articulation of the university enterprise, academic freedom becomes the freedom to be ‘entrepreneurial’ – to be creative in seeking new ways to generate revenue. This applies both at the organizational level, where “ways must be found to give [universities] more room to develop a strategic vision and take entrepreneurial risks” (p.102), but also at the level of employee identity:

A new role model, the entrepreneurial academic, has appeared on many campuses and some of them have become rich as a result of their efforts in consultancy, or by creating and subsequently selling spinout companies (Lambert, 2003, p.83).

Although enterprise discourse has become hegemonic at the level of government policy, as Laclau and Mouffe make clear, any such project is ultimately contingent, since it relies on an 'Other' that constitutes and therefore potentially subverts it. Enterprise discourse is constituted by its differential relation to traditional discourses associated with university life, such as scholarship and collegiality. In theorizing resistance, there are two possible approaches. One, following Fournier and Grey (1999) is to examine academics' identification with one of these competing discourses. The second approach, drawn from Laclau and Mouffe and taken here, is to examine the contingency of enterprise discourse – to explore its constituent elements in search of contradictions.

Managing careers and generating commitment

Specifically, there is a contradiction between the demands to commercialise research, as articulated by Lambert and a desire to make academics more accountable for their time spent doing research. The demand for accountability is manifest in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which provides ratings of research quality. The RAE commodifies academic labour, with products of academic research (books, journals etc) given a weighting and used to inform funding decisions (Willmott, 1995; 2003). It is informed by thinking on new public management, where audit replaces professional self-regulation and academics become employees of state capitalism (Jary, 2002; Prichard, 2000). In the RAE, research and its communication to an

academic audience via journals take precedence. It is here that a contradiction emerges which problematises Government's role model of the entrepreneurial academic who exploits the commercial potential of research. This contradiction is illustrated through an analysis of reward and recruitment practices.

Several schools have developed new performance indicators that measure and place a greater value on enterprise. One school used to just look at publications and teaching, but has recently added criteria of 'inputs' and 'impact'. The former measures money sourced externally, while the latter measures the effect of a person's work on stakeholders. At another school, 'enterprise' has become the fourth promotion criterion alongside teaching, research and administration.

However, despite the formal recognition of enterprise, respondents believed that securing academic publications for the RAE was still a higher priority than being commercially enterprising. One commented that:

It only helps if you've still got that research. It's not an either or. They expect it to be an add-on. They think it is great and would love you to do more of it, but that's on top of research, rather than instead of research.

The pressure to 'publish or perish' is felt most acutely by junior faculty, who are under pressure to develop a journal publication track record, in order to satisfy the requirements of the RAE. Consequently, there is little time available for them to undertake 'enterprising' activities. Even if there is time, such activity is unlikely to attract the same institutional rewards as scholarly publications. One respondent, a

young lecturer in the field of entrepreneurship, is heavily engaged in outreach activities with industry. In many ways, he represents the role model of the 'entrepreneurial academic', as articulated by Lambert (2003). He was a key figure behind the award of nearly £2 million in public funding to set up a new institute at the business school, has been active in policy discussion at a regional and national level, developed a business-to-business networking event with local business and makes regular appearances in the media. This is work he has enjoyed doing, but sees it coming at a cost to his chances of promotion.

The biggest problem that I have is that I've excelled enormously well in this area in terms of linkage with local businesses but it's not something that will help me get onto my senior lectureship. And that's my biggest major annoyance at the moment, in order to do these things I've sacrificed my research output and in doing that I've made it more difficult for myself to get promotion.

Recruitment practices can also work against the fostering of enterprise. Many respondents suggested that because of the value placed on journal publication, business schools are reluctant to hire people from industry, who are well placed to help develop an enterprise culture but yet usually have no track record of publication.

One respondent stated that:

It's extremely difficult for people who have done business to come in and study business and turn out a respectable RAE performance in a faculty like this. It's extremely hard to do and I know very few people who have succeeded in doing it.

The picture is complicated by the growth of commercial research centres within business schools. Business schools are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial in turning to external funders to supplement their core funding from the public purse. This can be through direct grants or the sale of research and other consultancy activities. Clients can include commercial organizations, charities and other not-for-profit organizations, and government departments. While money from UK research councils is generally regarded as the most prestigious funding, it is also more competitive and the amounts awarded tend to be small compared with sponsored research. Therefore, contract research, conducted through research centres, is a potentially significant revenue stream for business schools.

Several research centre faculty who took part in the study either had no established publication record or were no longer seeking one. These respondents tended to identify with enterprise discourse in describing their work, as illustrated by the following quote.

Our entire bias starts with a client orientation and that means we have geared our activities towards that practitioner/user community, either industry or policy. What that means in practice is that we deliberately started to emphasise some things and deemphasise others. I stopped writing academic publications...our client base would not regard that sort of work as providing legitimation or accreditation for what we do.

However, this respondent felt marginalised by the lecturing faculty within the school.

Once we get out the door here our status shoots up. Come back here and we're nobody, just dogsbody contract researchers. Go out the door and we're industry experts worth a fortune.

Similar sentiments were expressed by one contract researcher who has his own consultancy business that generates potential clients for contract research, is providing bespoke research that benefits commercial organizations which lack dedicated R&D departments and is generating additional revenue for the business school through these activities. Far from feeling like a role model as envisaged by Lambert, he feels like a “second class citizen” within the school and “not a proper academic”, because he is yet to develop a track record in academic journal publications.

In these research centres, faculty tend to prioritise engagement with external constituencies and therefore have little time to publish in academic journals. The overall picture is the emergence of a split between high-status RAE contributing faculty and low-status contract researchers who are expected to generate revenue and demonstrate the ‘relevance’ of their institutions. One explanation of these phenomena is that business schools want to be both academic departments *and* commercial enterprises and their reward and recruitment practices reflect this. In other words, it is to argue that there are multiple discourses competing for hegemony over the constitution of the business school. An alternative explanation, which draws on the insights of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, is to suggest there is a contradiction within the discursive articulation of enterprise between two of its constituent elements – commercial research and audit. The use of the RAE to

increase the productivity of academics has led to the Government's preferred identity of the commercially oriented researcher becoming a marginalised figure within UK research-led business schools.

Managing academic freedom and autonomy

Academic freedom is legally protected through its incorporation in UK statute, however the interest here is not the legal status of academic freedom, but how it is enacted in the day-to-day activities of UK business schools. As business schools seek to be more enterprising, they are encouraged to think more strategically about their engagements with external stakeholders. They become more conscious of their public profile, which can lead to censorship of faculty whose work is perceived to tarnish the image of the school and to threaten its relationship with industry and government sponsors.

Earlier, it was noted how Lambert (2003) believes that while universities are not business they must act like businesses. The increasing attention given to branding and public image by business schools is a 'business-like' activity and can be used to justify the imposition of conditions on academic freedom. This demand for loyalty, of course, contravenes the right of faculty to put forward controversial views without fear of losing their jobs and in particular, jeopardises the position of potential 'whistleblowers'.

One respondent, who manages a school, said he would intervene if faculty were damaging the school's brand. When asked to explain what this meant in practice, he said:

I would just say 'I forbid you to do it'. And they have a choice then. If I give them a direct instruction and they disobey it then I will fire them. That would be gross...it would have to be quite serious before they did that. It would have to be the equivalent of gross misconduct, but I would certainly do it... There's a point beyond which freedom becomes disloyalty and ultimately I see that as one of my responsibilities to make that judgement and defend that judgement.

A story told by several respondents at one school concerned a faculty member who was involved in establishing an 'anti-capitalism' discussion group at the university. When the head of the school became aware of this, she ordered him to withdraw from the group, because she considered it was not appropriate for a business school to be associated with anti-capitalism. She was concerned about the possibility of upsetting potential sponsors of a new research centre at the school². This story is illustrative of concerns about academic freedom, with the fear being that business schools, by entering into 'partnership' with industry and government sponsors, lose their independence and their capacity for critique.

Censorship can also occur when external sponsors seek to exert their influence on the work undertaken by faculty, not just in terms of setting the research agenda, but also by influencing how the research is conducted and how findings are disseminated. One respondent, who works in a research centre, described an incident which occurred when he was invited to present a paper at an industry conference. He drafted a paper that was highly critical of a firm that he had previously provided consultancy services to. The company was a significant funder of his university and when it became aware of the criticism, it approached the head of the school and

threatened to withdraw its funding unless the criticism was removed. The faculty member stood his ground and the funding was not withdrawn, but he has not been asked to work for the firm again.

While some instances of censorship were reported, there is no indication of widespread, overt ideological control in the six business schools studied. However, faculty did report a high incidence of self-censorship, meaning they avoided potentially controversial work that might upset either the business school or key external stakeholders. While academic freedom has legal status, respondents believed it was usually not worth the fight that would be involved to assert their right to speak out.

Self-identification with enterprise discourse

These threats to academic freedom cannot be ignored, but the findings also offer some cause for optimism, since there is evidence that the promotion of enterprise discourse is not uniformly negative for the protection of academic freedom and autonomy. Autonomy and freedom are commodified – becoming objects that give business schools a competitive advantage and that demonstrate the relevance of the institution, therefore justifying its continued support from the public fund.

An illustration of the commodification of critical thought is the sale of consulting work undertaken by business school faculty. Lambert (2003), in his review of university-industry collaboration, is keen to increase the level of consultancy, because of the revenue it brings to universities and because it can foster research collaboration between the university and industry. For those respondents engaged in consulting, the

independence and capacity for critique that derive from their position within a university becomes a major selling point.

One respondent, who is active in consultancy with companies and non-profit organizations, stated that

Companies are becoming increasingly sceptical of consultants because they often offer a packaged solution, so in areas where the problem is non-standard that's not enough. They also want people who are going to look in more depth without an axe to grind and without a pre-formulated answer, which is precisely what being critical offers. The willingness to be critical is what some companies want.

Another respondent, who is heavily involved in consultancy, identifies strongly with the identity of the 'academic entrepreneur'.

On all of our activities we have to meet market demands. And everybody here equally runs their own business. So for me, gaining money, gaining revenue, dealing with client needs, meeting client needs, doing research, having that research positioned so that it adds value to them, running a budget, having the academic community as only one particular stakeholder group has been my life for as long as I've known it. So I can't even identify with the research community.

However, while rejecting the identity of 'academic', this respondent does identify with the role of 'critic'. He identifies two sets of responsibilities – providing a service to the client, but also upholding values of academic freedom and autonomy.

The second area of responsibility is that you are a university. And as a university, despite the fact that you are financially, potentially financially constrained by clients, you do have to stand above that and offer an opinion in terms of what's happening.

These findings suggest that meanings of autonomy and freedom within the university enterprise are multiple and contested. At the level of government policy, it means the freedom to generate revenue. This threatens a long-held understanding of academic freedom which positions university faculty as detached from the corrupting influences of external stakeholders such as industry and government sponsors. A different interpretation comes from faculty member's self-identification with enterprise discourse, in which autonomy, freedom and the role of the critic can be accommodated.

Conclusion

It is clear that policymakers in higher education remain infatuated with the discourse of enterprise, as they do in other areas of the public sector. This is problematic for the management of academics as knowledge workers, since its articulation by Government poses a direct challenge to freedom and autonomy. This is ironic given that knowledge-intensive firms are supposed to be distinctive in the autonomy bestowed on employees and a greater respect for and reliance upon their expert knowledge. In today's universities, Government's narrow vision of enterprise as commercial exploitation risks compromising these values and with it the motivation, loyalty and commitment of university faculty.

It becomes increasingly difficult, even for those cynical about new public management, to think about, talk about and practice higher education without making reference to some notion of enterprise (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992). This does not mean that its effects are total and uncontested and this paper goes further to suggest that these effects are not uniformly negative. Resistance to enterprise can be explained by the existence of competing discourses which subjects can draw on in constituting their identities (Fournier & Grey, 1999). This findings from this study suggest that in addition, we should look within the hegemonic discourse itself and in particular the inconsistencies which create opportunities to challenge and subvert it. Government's desire for more commercial research is stymied by the RAE, an audit mechanism which itself is part of enterprise discourse. A second set of possibilities for resistance comes from the 'over-determined' meaning of enterprise. At the level of Government policy, 'enterprise' is narrowly defined in commercial terms. However, one can be 'enterprising' in different ways, some of which openly challenge the narrow definition of enterprise put forward by Government and affirm the role of the autonomous and critical academic.

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, with its distinctive ontology and assumption of radical contingency, has the potential to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of organizational change. Through its broad definition of discourse as articulatory practice, it is useful for exploring organisational change across multiple levels, from the language of policy to management practices as well as processes of identification. Laclau and Mouffe's assumption of radical contingency of objects, identities and practices highlights the contingency of the enterprise project. Even if this order appears as 'the new reality' there is always opportunity for knowledge

workers to exploit inconsistencies with a discursive articulation in order to resist and rearticulate it.

It would be unwise to claim too much for Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, since its application to organisational analysis is in its formative stage. Much work remains to be done on a detailed comparison of this approach with critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian analysis, which are more established in the organizational change literature. In addition, discourse theory is an abstract amalgam of concepts and its use as a methodological instrument requires further elaboration. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper has demonstrated that such undertakings would be worthy ones.

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Notes

¹ For an excellent account of the ontological differences between discourse theory and critical realism see Willmott (2005).

² Both the head of the school and the faculty member concerned declined my request for an interview