

The Knowledge Business: The Commodification of Urban and Housing Research, Chris Allen and Rob Imrie (Eds), Ashgate (2010), 298 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7546-7690-4. £60.00 (hardback).

Besides teaching, faculty and postgrads are generally expected to maintain a robust research agenda in the spirit of creating “new knowledge” to feed back into education. In engineering and the so-called hard sciences, useful application of new knowledge is fundamental to research design and often manifests as intellectual property disclosures and commercialized products. Social scientists often see research as an end unto itself – critical inquiry about society to further dialogue about complicated social issues. The neoliberal turn of national governments has brought intense pressure on all university researchers to justify their existence on public tax rolls by positioning their work in the context of an imagined “public interest.” Education and critical thought are no longer justification enough. Social scientists must now reckon with the pressure to commercialize their work by selling their proposals as useful and creating products of economic value. Through the reflective essays in *The Knowledge Business*, Chris Allen, Rob Imrie, and their co-contributors explore the challenges of practicing contract research in urban contexts.

Allen and Imrie’s introduction strikes a sharp critical note. They assert that the encroachment of capitalism, through corporate and state sponsorship, is negatively shaping academic research. Ostensibly, the integrity of honest scholarship is governed by institutional ethics codes, peer review panels, and standard practices of disclosure. In reality, they argue scholarship is subject to a pervasive discourse of commercialization that reaches all facets of research and review process. Taking a cue from Bourdieu and Wacquant’s commentary on globalization, Allen and Imrie eloquently describe the process by which “choices that have been made by political elites are presented in terms of necessities that cannot be avoided (4).” They view commercialized research as deleterious to the imagination and integrity of scholars, and in stark contrast to the idea that universities are bastions of sustained,

independent critical thought. Unanimously, the contributors to this book support this view and draw upon personal experiences to elucidate the problematic reorientation of university research missions.

Chapters 2-7 are grouped around reflections of “institutional politics of the knowledge business.” Imrie (Chapter 2) follows the introduction with an opening treatise on the nature of contract research. He argues that since the products of contract research are intended for consumptive purposes, funders have a practical interest and often dictate the scope and methodology for projects. Quite simply, researchers find themselves handcuffed by the terms of the contract. Even worse, their criticisms spun from contracted work may be censored or suppressed by the funding agency if such critique is deemed to be outside of the scope of the project. He illustrates these points by demonstrating the heavy hand of the UK’s Department of Communities and Local Government’s (DCLG), in shaping urban research agendas. Allen and Pauline Marne (Chapter 4) run with this theme through a case study of urban regeneration research in Liverpool. In this case, contract academics were hired to research questions regarding housing and gentrification. Allen and Marne deftly point out that the terms of the research, down to the research questions, were set in such a way that the outcomes – favorable to gentrifying elites – were known before the study even commenced. Huw Thomas (Chapter 5) writes about university-city coalitions. He presents the case of a researcher at Cardiff University whose critical history of Cardiff, funded by the city for a coffee-table book, was essentially censored by the university for not adhering to the boosterish spirit of the contract. These three studies are the standouts, arguing that commercialized research is corrupted and damaging to the reputations of the scholars behind the work. Chapters 3, 6, and 7 offer more general comments about institutional politics and commercialized research, but do not address specific urban dimensions.

Chapters 8-12 are grouped under the heading “entrepreneurialism and the academic labor process.” Tony Manzi and Bill Smith-Bowers (Chapter 8) distill the many practices of housing research into several concise typologies, emphasizing the perspectives which are lost when operating in a contract

environment. Paul O'Hare, Jon Coaffee, and Marian Hawksworth (Chapter 9) offer a refreshing "how-to" manual to aid the critical researcher cautiously wading into the contract research pool. Loretta Lees and David Demeritt (Chapter 10) assemble a chapter of reflections on the challenges of conducting postgraduate research in public-private collaborative situations. For their case, they select six ESRC-CASE and ESRC-ODPM projects and detail the changing expectations and work-loads that postgraduate students (and their advisors) face. Vickie Cooper (Chapter 11) follows-up with her autobiographical account of experiences as an MRes student, funded by an ESRC 1+3 fellowship. Her insights address the differences between the practically oriented MRes degree, and the traditional MA or MSc degree. Gilles Pinson (Chapter 12) considers the neoliberal shift in French academia, tracing changes from traditional structures to evolving forms of research administration.

Noel Castree (Chapter 13) kicks off the two concluding chapters with a call to expunge commercial research from British universities. Imrie and Allen (Chapter 14) are not quite as radical in their final chapter, but do summarize the chapters as an extended reflection on what the core values of university research should be. Their punchline – that the knowledge business undermines the traditions of academia – benefits greatly from some added reflection on the book's content and larger discussions about neoliberalism.

Allen, in particular, has established himself as an unabashed critic of contract research and calls on critical scholars to take a "stand of hostility" towards applied policy research contracts (Allen 2011). His hard-line opinion is reflected in the majority of the papers here, and that is both good and bad. On the positive end, the authors apply sophisticated critique to the issue at hand. The empirical case studies, while limited, support the cause and cannot be simply dismissed as aberrant complaints. But, the sustained critique often comes across as overzealous. Many of the essays open with bold polemics, but fail to deliver empirical support or even creative suggestions. For example, several authors attack the favor that funding agencies place on quantitative analysis. Instead of favoring their own methodological inclinations,

these authors could reflect on ways in which critical scholars can subvert the neoliberal agenda by *using* spatial analysis (see for example Dixon & Jones 1998).

Nevertheless, in no way should the shortcomings of this book diminish its value in the eyes of concerned urban researchers. Allen and Imrie have started an important conversation here with a collection of bold arguments that are intended to raise ire amongst European (especially UK) faculty. But, it is just a start. In the United States, contract research (often incorporated into the land grant missions of public universities) is standard practice and many critical scholars *embrace* the opportunity and challenge to translate critical theory into practical application. This book should prompt researchers outside the UK to join the conversation with more empirical studies and constructive counter-points. Community organizations and university administrators must be a part of this conversation, as well. Most of all, critical scholars who share Allen and Imrie's contempt should challenge themselves to imagine ways their work within commercialized urban research can subvert the neoliberal agenda behind it. After all, progressive change in urban communities will come via consciousness in the street, and not the ivory tower.

References

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