Dismantling the Monster?
Reflections on Audit Culture and Evidence-Based Research

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RESEARCHERS AND UNIVERSITIES seem these years to be haunted by a hilarious monster composed of equal parts of managerial technologies and compulsory methodologies. This creature is governing not only our working conditions but also our souls. Reading Davies (2003), Shore and Wright (2000), and others on audit cultures, compulsory evaluations, traumatised academics etc., it's not difficult to visualise this cyborg let out from neo-liberal cages, devastating the sacred halls of the academy with legs of managerial techniques to control and regulate every hour and act that used to belong to autonomous and critical intellectuals, and with arms composed of evidence-based tool boxes and a head full of vicious reductionist, primitive, misogynist, and right wing ideologies.

The story goes that this monster is roaming the American scene of educational research causing evidence-based educational policies to be given high priority through a reorganization of the US Institute for Educational Science. The institute was to spend a larger part of its research budget on randomised experimental research on education programmes and policies (OECD, 2003, p. 12). But the monster also appears in the disguise of the National Research Council 2002 report, *Scientific Research in Education* revealing, what Lather (2004) calls, "the government's incursion into legislating scientific method in the realm of educational research via the evidence-based movement" (p. 15). This report has stirred up a strong reaction against "what some believe is the federal government's narrowing of science in the service of accountability…so that scientific rigor becomes synonymous with a particular methodology" (St. Pierre, 2005, p. 4). The concerns raised are many, ranging from the risk of abandoning the insights of decades of educational research inherent in advocating the return of experimental designs, controlling what counts as science, rejecting qualitative methodology and waging cultural war on the proliferation of research approaches of the last twenty years from such areas of research as cultural studies, feminist analyses, ethnic studies and social studies of science (Lather, 2004).

Whereas the main concern in the US is government intrusion into the heart of science, questions of methodological freedom and political disciplining by the major public funding agency, the National Research Council, the monster has shown a much more greedy and all encompassing hold on the scientific communities and their populations in Britain through a decade long siege by an "explosion of auditable management control systems" (Trinder, 2000, p. 9). Using the concept of audit culture, Shore and Wright (2000) scrutinize what they see as a new governmental system that transforms the conduct of organisations and individuals by way of political technologies of self—a combination of external subjection and internal subjectification that makes individuals actively and freely act according to the norms through which they are governed.

Audit procedures present themselves as rational, objective and neutral, concerned with performance, quality control, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, responsibility and value for money, when they are in fact used to "construct evaluative grids…that simultaneously rank institutions and individuals against each other" (Shore and Wright, 2000, p. 61). Audit becomes a significant break with academic autonomy radically changing the working conditions of academics and transforming the organisation of universities and the structures of academic disciplines. Others talk about how audit culture promotes a "new orthodoxy" aimed at methodology in educational research privileging large scale correlations and experimental approaches over qualitative enquiry (Torrance, 2005; Hammersley, 2005).

Davies (2003) and Davies and Pedersen (2005) offer similar reflections on the Australian development. They emphasize the effects of the neo-liberal new managerialism on academics and discuss the implications of evidence-based practices. For feminists there are many reasons for concern. Feminists involved in theoretical and complex empirical studies, be it poststructuralist, qualitative, transgressive or some other kinds of open-ended and critical, analytical endeavours, will match the evidence-based knowledge cultures and the audit demands with its predefined goals and procedures of evaluation very badly indeed.

This essay addresses the monster's entry into the Nordic countries of Europe, using Denmark as an example. We take a closer look at the current trends as they have reached the Danish scene—and try to open a discussion about ways to counter these trends. We are—perhaps naively, but hopefully naive in a productive way—curious about alternative positionings to those known from the British, American and Australian reports. We invite a continuation of the discussion on strategy assuming—in line with our feminist colleagues abroad—that feminist scholars might posses some of the more creative potentials in relation to strategic thinking when it comes to this particular kind of monstrosity.

A Nordic Monster?

As things look now, the situation in Denmark is less dramatic than in the other countries mentioned. To illustrate this we will offer two examples. The first is an audit measure, the introduction of performance indicators as resource allocation measures and the second is the evidence case.

Performance Indicators

In 1995 the Ministry of Education recommended that Denmark develop a system for resource allocation to the universities in line with the British model based on performance indicators (Hansen & Borum, 1999). The Ministry was supported in this ambition by the OECD, which recommended that reallocation and concentration of research resources based on peer review should be implemented in the Danish university system. This proposal met strong resistance among the many public institutions and organisations mediating the political-administrative system with the research system. A study of the processes of developing research and educational evaluation in the Danish university sector (Hansen & Borum, 1999) shows that, after twenty some years of developing strategic planning and evaluation procedures working toward establishing a system of resource allocation based on performance indicators in the Danish universities, the Danish Ministry of Research had to abandon the system and instead start working on establishing public contracts with each university. This was in 1999—and it is still the policy today.

The ideas brought in from the UK by an officious OECD-body were transformed into a different and less aggressive kind of force. Danish universities did experience a climate in which political discussions were humming with talk of structural reforms and new managerial practices. They had over the past decade been subjected to evaluations carried out by a government body, The Centre for Evaluation. Most of these evaluations resulted in recommendations to be carried out at the discretion of the institutions themselves, only a few of these included specific obligatory demands. These processes marked the introduction of new managerialism in the university sector and shook the academic autonomy of the universities. They contributed to an atmosphere of increasing pressures towards effectiveness and change, for instance, in patterns of publication toward international peer reviewed journals with high impact factor. Reductions in funding, due to a decrease in government research funding through the National Research Councils, reduced the access of faculty staff to research funding independent of their institutions and increased the pressures to seek private funds or commercial sources for external funding. An example of the changes for which this political climate was an accomplice is the introduction of a financial resource allocation system that was put in place by the Social Science Faculty of the University of Copenhagen. The system involved the allocation of a small part (5%)—but steadily increasing in the following years—of the financial resources to the different departments under the Faculty according to, among other things, the number and types of publications produced and to the amount of external funding attracted by the departments. This system was introduced years before the legal changes that are transforming the university sector more radically at the moment.

The first part of the neo-liberal legal reform process was instigated with the passing of a new law governing the universities, which abolished democratically elected leadership in the universities and installed boards of directors with a majority of external members. The law also demanded professional administrators to be employed at all levels from vice-chancellors to heads of departments. This process was fully implemented by the summer of 2006. A second part of the reform process is being debated at the moment—in the spring of 2007—as yet another university law on its way through parliament. With this law a new body is introduced in university leadership, namely a panel consisting of (external) representatives from private and public organizations that employ university candidates. The panel is supposed to comment and offer suggestions on relevance and quality of educational programmes at the university.

Accompanying these legal changes is the administrative change embodied in the so-called 'Development Contracts' concluded between the Ministry of Research, Technology and Innovation on one side and the individual universities on the other. The contracts show clear signs of ministry control with demands of quantitative and measurable indicators of university activities and research results. In the case of the Danish University of Education (DPU) the contract even demands a higher priority of particular kinds of methodologies and research areas concerning the development of new tests for the Danish primary school (Forskerforum, 2005, p. 1). The DPU board, the vice-chancellor and the Ministry have, however, given assurance that this contract is not aimed at dismissing the research activities, areas and methodologies that are already established. It is only indicating additional research areas in order to change the overall profile of the university. Time will show if this is a cover for the monster to crawl on board and take over while researchers feel assured no harm is done—or whether it is a reduced and Nordic version of monstrosity.

Though these reforms were fought primarily by professors and researchers within the universities, they were embraced by the wider public. These reforms are part of a wider sweep of new managerialism in the public sector at large and thus contained within the logic of the so-called necessary modernization of the welfare state for better utilisation of public resources—the 'value for money' argument being very much alive in this country too. Furthermore, some of the effects of the reforms, such as the new university law, were actually welcomed by parts of the university faculty, since much of this so-called democratic leadership of the universities was seen as a hypocritical cover for all sorts of power games; for instance, "old boys" networks in which privileges, positions and resources are passed around among particular groups of academics (Søndergaard, 2004), also referred to as the phenomenon of gate keeping in many feminist analyses (Essed, 2004; Husu, 2001). So some of these new and more instrumental and technical means of recognition and allocation of resources actually meant that research areas and groups of researchers, formerly marginalised by the old networks, would now have an opportunity to get recognition and resources (for a critical discussion see Davies (2005)).

This indicates the criss-crossing of interests in this policy area and adds to the difficulty in predicting the outcome of this process. Furthermore it should be noted that there is a certain time lag characterizing Danish research policies. This may prove important since research policies to a great extent work as copy-cat practices, that is ideas and measures of successful research policies are imitated and imported from other countries. However, these ideas are, often translated and adjusted to the local context (Hansen, 2002, p. 51). So even if the UK model was transformed to some extent, other managerial practices may be down the pipeline for us—may be channelled into the system by way of tightening and elaborating the development contracts between universities and the Ministry. In spite of this, it looks as if the monster from the UK-cages is received by a more *yui yitzu*-like movement in Denmark—it is followed, encircled and transformed into something different. So far we may conclude that our destiny has neither been complete surrender to the monster, nor a complete defeat—it looks like something else is happening.

Evidence

The other example we want to draw on is the advent of the 'evidence' case. Unlike in the US this did not hit the Danish research world as a direct government intrusion. The demand for

evidence-based research came as part of the OECD policy-recommendations to improve the Danish school system. It was introduced as a recommendation towards a change in research strategies worth taking up in Danish educational research and this resulted in an agreement between the Danish Ministry of Education and The Danish University of Education (DPU) to establish a Clearing House modelled after the famous American What Works!-version (OECD, 2003, p. 13). However, this initiative was embraced by a rather ambivalent vice-chancellor of the university—himself a philosopher with no veneration for any naive versions of neo-positivism. His idea was, consequently, that evidence-based educational research in a Nordic tradition should be thoroughly contextualised by other kinds of research and may even be translated into 'empirical research' as such; that is, research grounded in empirical material (Schmidt, 2004). In 2006 the Clearing House was opened, and the suggested organisation includes an 'observatory' that, among other things, is to contextualise and reflect the very concept of evidence-based research. To date we haven't, however, seen much activity from the Clearing House. Neither DPU nor the Ministry has provided sufficient resources for the institution to start its work at any level of efficiency. What we have here is not exactly an unequivocal surrender to the US official understanding of evidence-based research as strictly experimental or quasi-experimental design based on large scale statistically processed surveys.

Furthermore the OECD itself seems to be two-tongued on the matter of evidence-based research: On the one side they base their report, *New Challenges for Educational Research* (OECD, 2003), and many of their recommendations on the reviews of two countries: UK and New Zealand, and on examples from the US. All of these countries are very advanced in promoting 'evidence-based' policy making and pressing for 'evidence-based' research. On the other side their own discussion is much more reflective on the matter, voicing doubt whether: "…our knowledge on 'what works' in educational practice can be significantly improved much in the same way as has been the case in medicine" (OECD, 2003, p. 12). The OECD states that: "Teaching and learning is extraordinarily complex in that education deals with desired states rather than stable phenomenon and these are debatable and contestable" (p. 12). Among their recommendations for educational researchers are that the researchers engage in use-inspired-basic-research and extensive collaboration with teachers and in "co-ordinating small as well as large-scale multi-site experiments to create bodies of cumulative knowledge" (p. 17). The specific recommendations that the OECD voiced in their National Review on Denmark (OECD, 2004) included among their 35 recommendations the deployment of tests of students' achievements in schools, strengthening of school management, and improvement of teachers' qualifications. This National Review was subject to a heated public debate in Denmark, embraced by politicians but it suffered the ignominy of being dismissed as not grounded in evidence by a prestigious independent weekly magazine, Mandag Morgen. The magazine published an analysis of the OECD recommendations concluding that these recommendations themselves were not based on evidence (Mandag Morgen, 2005).

At the moment the status of 'evidence' in Denmark can be summed up as this: the 'evidence wave' has been introduced by the OECD evaluation panel to be taken up in Danish educational research. It is explicitly mentioned in the development contract of the Danish University of Education as one of the important points to enhance in the university's research profile. The Danish University of Education has established a Clearinghouse, at the moment however in a very low key version. The concept of evidence-based research is moving into social science research by way of a recently founded, publicly financed Nordic Campbell Centre—that was established in 2002 for a five year period and was connected to Socialforskningsinstituttet, a

Danish research institute for applied social science research, and to the International Campbell Cooperation (www.sfi.dk). The Campbell initiative is still small scale and does not seem to have broad support among social scientists. So the demand for 'evidence-based' research in Denmark is not at this point a result of government efforts to influence research methodology in general—except in the case of the development contract in the DPU—nor is it at this point tied to allocation of large-scale resources. There are many voices—and voices with authority—that take part in a contextualisation and differentiation of this approach opening the possibility of integration of evidence-based research as one method among several and of fruitful cooperation between these parties.

Dismantling Dualism

We might be witnessing a piecemeal injection of the global medicine of audit and evidence-based research into the university system and the scientific community in the Nordic countries. But while we are pondering that, we might contemplate strategies to counter the full dose. Denmark and the other Nordic countries can be characterised as network societies. Political practice involves a large number of actors (organisations, political parties, groups of users or professionals, experts, etc.) in political decision making processes—either as part of expert panels that prepare the decisions or as part of consulting procedures preceding the final outcome (Hansen, 2002). Because of this political culture, we may find some space of manoeuvre in relation to the monsters we are addressing here. The tradition for bottom up governance creates a wide range of organisations to channel the many interests in research policy. This situation has resulted in multi-institutional policies that somehow manage to restrain the stricter and unified top down decisions known from countries like the US and the UK. This description of the Danish situation alludes to the possibility of a quick annihilation of the monster either by political means or by resistance from the research community. We may envisage a possibility of reinstalling the old balance of an independent autonomous academic sphere vis-à-vis a political/administrative sphere. This may be a scenario that critics of audit culture seem to assume (and wish) as a possible solution: Back to the good old days of academic autonomy (Davies, 2003, p. 91; Manifest, 2005).

We are, however, a bit hesitant vis-à-vis this scenario. It presupposes a static comprehension, possibly even a glorification, of the relation between science and society that we don't share. But more importantly it is unrealistic to imagine these new tendencies as a passing phenomenon. It may be more productive to follow the ideas of scholars who argue that a transformation of the relations between science and society (Nowotney, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001) is happening, whether we like it or not, and that new managerial practices as well as the demand for evidence-based knowledge are but one set of expressions of a new configuration of science and society.

Scholars of science policy tend to agree that a shift in policy occurred around 1980 where the idea of a distinct demarcation between science and society, a line only crossed by financial resources from society to the scientific community and scientific results from the scientific community to society (Hansen, 2002, p. 47), was abolished and replaced by collaboration and interference in various forms. This shift brought to the fore and emphasised the widespread conceptualisation of a dualism between basic research and applied research. The discussions and controversies within and outside university politics about priorities between those two kinds of approaches kept reproducing this discourse of a 'clean' autonomous science opposed to a com-

missioned and/or user dominated kind of research. The latter often materialised in research products identified as evaluation or mere descriptive kinds of work. This dualism is constantly nourished by statements from politicians such as 'from research to invoice,' a favoured expression of the Danish minister of research, and through the realisation of a series of politically defined research projects.

Attempts to nuance this discourse point out that the tension between science and society should rather be conceptualised as a tension among a range of actors (Hansen, 2002) whose interests and cultures result in different kinds of rationalities and demands. Instead of only two actors, namely academic interests in university autonomy versus society's interest in usability, we now have a multitude of actors involved in negotiations and discursive wrestling. To mention some of them, we have: 1) academic interest in autonomy; 2) economic interests in commodifiable knowledge (as is seen in relation to medical and technological products); 3) bureaucratic interests in knowledge about 'what works' in relation to welfare politics, educational and health politics; and 4) civil interests: a more diffuse range of interests among ordinary people and grass root organisations concerning social life, and life in general. All of these actors are now involved—with or against each other—in the process of defining the role of academic work.

The idea here is to show a transformation from a situation where the academy was rather independent and autonomous into the current situation where power relations have moved away from the academy's autonomy into a set of shifting potential alliances between economic (industrial) and bureaucratic forces. In the current situation this transformation leaves civil society out as an active subject in these processes. Somehow the civil society seems merely to be represented as either clients of the bureaucratic sphere or consumers of industrial products.

Still, in this rather more complex model, we have the opposition between science and society reproduced, only now with society represented as a more merged group of 'user interests.' Somehow all actors tend to take their positions in this dualistic discourse: Some of the industrial 'users' for instance, talk about a 'tango' between users and researchers, where 'users' are to dominate the dance, taking the male position, and researchers are to follow, taking the female position and gain influence by seducing the 'male partner.' Some sectors of industry in Denmark love this metaphor (Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2005), and in their cooperation with researchers they keep up a position that stays within this dualistic discourse. 'Users' in terms of bureaucrats take up their position in the dualistic model by demanding particular types of knowledge that sometimes make the use of specific methods necessary, as is the case with evidence-based results. Whereas the researchers tend to take up one of two positions available in this dualistic construction: Either as the proud and classic academics that do their own stuff not letting plain users disturb and define their work or, as the caricature painted from within the intellectual hierarchies will have it, the 'fallen' researchers, wagging their tails with dollar signs in their eyes and no academic principles left (Højgaard, 2004).

Now, we'd like to challenge this picture. Embracing and paraphrasing Latour (1993) and his 'We Have Never Been Modern' we would like to claim: 'Science Has Never Been 'Basic.' Science has never been 'basic,' 'pure,' 'independent,' 'innocent,' or detached from reality. Researchers have always processed experiences, perspectives and impressions from a more extended reality than the one visualised in an isolated laboratory or an isolated individual world of thinking. Researchers have always been socially saturated, and situated, as feminists have pointed out for decades (Haraway, 1986; Harding, 1986). Class, gender, nation and other social means of differentiation have definitely structured which experiences and kinds of social status gained access to scientific processing. Parallel to this we'd like to claim that the so-called 'users'

have never been mere 'users.' Their needs and demands for knowledge are and have always been saturated with conceptualisations of what knowledge might be and is embedded in practices of current knowledge production. The 'users' (industrial, bureaucrats, politicians, NGOs) have always talked their needs and demands into existence through the discourses of knowledge and science that they have had access to and taken up as their own. 'Users' form and express their knowledge demands within the available structures of knowledge production. And they pick and choose among the varied kinds of knowledge discourses and production practices prevailing in their present.

So what we have here are tensions among many interacting, sometimes mutually supporting, sometimes contradictive, voices and forces. However the interesting thing about these voices and forces is that they don't work as clearly demarcated entities bumping into each other every now and then. They have always saturated the discourses and practices of each other's domains. Thus the adequate conceptualisation of the relation between science and society is, in the words of Jasanoff (2004), to treat science and politics as "strands of a single tightly woven cultural enterprise through which human beings seek to make sense of their condition" (p. 21). In line with this there are at least two reasons why we might want to give up the dualistic model of science versus society. One is that it is too simple a thinking-technology in the current situation. The other is that it aims at producing social realities that create winners and losers, and that situation may leave all of us, researchers and users, more ignorant than necessary.

We'd like to avoid winners and losers here, not only because we fear as feminists and critical academics to be on the losing part, but also because we, users, and the world in general need something else. We live in a global society that is in severe need of knowledge capable of facing problems at all levels from famine, global crime, illiteracy, religious fundamentalism, wars, imbalances among economic resources of different parts of the world, different social classes in the nations, knowledge capable of facing misogyny, racism, sexism, paedophilia, trafficking, you name it. Or to put it more simply: We are in severe need of knowledge producing processes to keep qualifying our take on life, and as feminists, gender researchers and critical academics we want our voices heard in this knowledge production.

A New Strategy?

If we take this to be a fruitful argument upon which to elaborate, we might want to change our focus. Rather than contributing to the ongoing reproduction of a distinct opposition between science and users/society, an opposition that is implied in many of the current critical stands on audit culture and evidence-based research, we might want to focus upon the possible platforms and types of dialogue among the many actors. In particular we might want to focus upon the possibility of creating a state of (more) equal authority among them. This would pinpoint the following: Research topics and questions of all kinds need to be chosen and qualified in dialogues among the involved actors, and in mutual respect. Definitions are not a privilege of a tango master: Industry, Ministries or the like. The spectre of users should never be limited to industry, politicians and bureaucrats. Society contains a much wider variety of people and groups in need of knowledge, and it contains a much wider variety of types of interests, values and fields of life than those expressed by either economy or politics governing through market conditions. It means that users can never simply demand specific pieces of knowledge, not to mention results, since knowledge is always constructed by way of theory, conceptual ap-

proaches, methodological takes, etc., so wishes for specific knowledge must be subject to elaborate dialogue. The vehicle to put this into practice could be utilization and elaboration of the networks of the Network Society.

Let us for a moment return to the example of evidence-based research. Evidence-based research, in the current conception, is but one method, one approach, among many. Evidence-based research consists of a particular kind of language, within which it is possible to know certain things, to ask certain kinds of questions, to produce a particular kind of knowledge, all of which implies that evidence-based methods produce certain kinds of non-knowledge, un-reflected issues and un-askable questions. That's why ideas about evidence-based research as a 'non-ideological' kind of science are pure fiction—as is any idea about any kind of research as 'non-ideological.' Evidence-based methods presume research questions that concentrate on issues that can be measured unequivocally. Its target is to produce well defined methods of intervention, the effects of which are equally measurable. It can (when taking up randomised trials, for example) only work on the basis of large populations, in contexts and by means that will not create ethical problems. On these premises it is a good research strategy for quite specific purposes. However evidence-based methods are unable to address and investigate: Complex processes, contexts and relations, complex patterns and dynamics, not to mention developmental and or constitutive processes, and they are unable to analyse in a differentiated way why something happens in some ways for some people and not for others. Individual or small scale differences and variations are difficult to address. In addition to this, anything that has to do with intersubjectivity and relational processes falls out of reach. The method is not well suited to investigate alternatives, suggest new developments or deal with situations where the already implemented interventions that are evaluated, are altogether irrelevant to the problem that is addressed. This would have come as no surprise to the so-called father of evidence-based research, Cochrane, who published his book on *Effectiveness and Efficiency* in 1972 (Cochrane, 1972). He would not take evidence-based methods to be the only valid evaluation methods in his field, medicine. So the current wave of demands for evidence-based research as the sole valid research approach within, for example, American educational politics is really a result of lack of mutual respect and dialogue among actors—politicians, officials and researchers in the educational field.

These are some of the strengths and differences that eventual evidence-demanding users need to know. They need researchers to help them qualify their need of knowledge and the research questions they would like to raise. They need researchers to help find adequate theory and methodology for the specific problems they bring into the dialogue. Users need to know much more about the potentials in research, in critical, reflective research as well as in the varied strengths and potentials of all sorts of other research approaches. The so-called users need to have their conceptualisation of science and knowledge qualified. And they need to have their respect for researchers as competent dialogue partners restored since that will be a prerequisite for a process where researchers can help qualify definitions of knowledge demands, research approaches and analytic takes. And of course, researchers, for their part, need to know more about the world.

Concluding Remarks

We embrace the strategies put forward by feminist critics of audit culture and evidence-based research such as engaging in thorough discussions on the structure and context of the revitalization of the scientism of evidence (Lather, 2004), the need for strengthening our take on scientificity (Lather, 2005) and the call to re-appropriate the key concepts of audit culture such as quality, accountability and professionalism, question its effectiveness, and scrutinize its political function (Shore &Wright, 2000, p. 80). We also think it is crucial to analyse the effects of neoliberal technologies in academics and find strategies to counter the subtle transformations of our academic subject positions that Davies and Pedersen so vividly demonstrate (Davies, 2003; Davies & Pedersen, 2005).

However, in addition to this we advocate exploring the aforementioned space of manoeuvring and engage in a multifaceted dialogue with on the one hand 'users,' politicians and bureaucrats and on the other hand, a variety of methodological tools and to develop a sensitivity toward applicability of these to given tasks. For all these strategies to work we need to dismantle the monsters by dissolving outdated dichotomies and create liveable and viable relations between science and society.

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