

The Council of the Royal Society is a collection of men who elect each other to office and then dine together at the expense of the society to praise each other over wine and award each other medals.

Charles Babbage (1816)

Although Charles Babbage, generally regarded as the initiator of modern computing, ended his career largely forgotten, he clearly had a relevant insight into the way knowledge and research is controlled by small and often rather undistinguished elites.

Research knowledge, the value attributed to it by society and thus the funding it attracts, can be classified in a number of ways; but clearly the most important is whether it is likely to result in a commercial product (or 'social and economic benefit' to use the British Government's euphemistic terminology). Knowledge that companies can use to make money will always leak out and patents will be broken or circumvented as researchers compete to find out, for example, how to make low-power lasers or kill cancerous cells. But a great deal of research has no commercial value; research into the humanities and into quasi-scientific activities, such as biological taxonomy. Microsoft will not compete for the skills of such researchers even though it may buy individuals. Unnecessary research in turn divides into two categories; research which is useless but science-like, such as archaeology, and research which has no empirical output at all, such as philosophy, musicology or literature studies. Anthropology finds itself in a curious halfway house; by inception an empirical study, it has now morphed into a home for cultural studies-lite where no conceivable research result could make any difference to the conclusions of the endless round of seminars and self-regarding publications.

It might be thought that at a time of financial constraint this type of non-empirical research would be the first to be eliminated. But this would be to ignore two factors; the stranglehold that circles of interested researchers have on the allocation of resources and the growing importance of branding over content, especially in elite educational institutions. Non-empirical research is cheap, often requiring an academic with journalistic skills to sit at the computer for a few months, turning out two hundred pages for Routledge on metafiction or queer studies. It has its own shadow superstructure, conferences, review panels and journals which make it seem somehow analogous to evidence-based disciplines. And it thereby becomes a prestige-generation engine, impressing on the assorted scions of the East Asian nouveau riche that status can be achieved simply by being in the presence of these X-factor stars of humanities research. Market-savvy dons, brains unhinged by the torrents of email from the administration, know that even if they have no time to teach this river of customers, no-one will go home to their mansions on the banks the toxic rivers of the Middle Kingdom and complain that their courses were smoke and mirrors.

Separately, but related, is what may be called the escalator of mediocrity. Innovative thinkers are by definition disruptive, and the more machine-like the research system becomes, the more difficult it is to accommodate them. As a consequence, the imperative becomes greater to eliminate them from the system, like irritants from the gut. In modern times this is relatively straightforward, since the boundaries between academia and non-academia are marked by idiolects as rodents mark territory with urine. Those 'within' universities define those 'outside' universities as having nothing of value to contribute to their discourse<sup>1</sup>. This often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as researchers often stay outside the academy precisely because of their dislike of the twisted jargon humanities academics adopt to preserve their status. Whole subdisciplines can be created and nourished by an endless round of journals and conferences, while funding is approved or withdrawn by circles of accomplices. Synthetic disputes and the inception of new idiolects give the theatrical appearance of the advance of knowledge, especially among those who would not in fact be able to tell a genuine step forward from a trail of snail mucus. Mediocrities appoint mediocrities to reproduce their own values, and administrators probably rub their hands in glee, realising that these upcoming generations will be even less well-equipped to fight their latest bullying missive.

Babbage's observation and his eventual obscurity does not immediately suggest the situation was better in the past. However, at that time, geographical fragmentation meant that the different situations of individuals around the world made it more possible for the quirky and idiosyncratic to emerge. The rise of a global

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<sup>1</sup> There was formerly an American insecticide product, 'Roach Motel', marketed under the slogan 'They check in, but they can't check out'.

research paradigm, with parallel institutions promoting their wares in all systems makes it more difficult for the unusual to surface. It is possible to argue that a world with such a dense population must promote ideological uniformity or risk social collapse. Alternatively, social collapse may be better than the flat landscape this control on ideas implies.