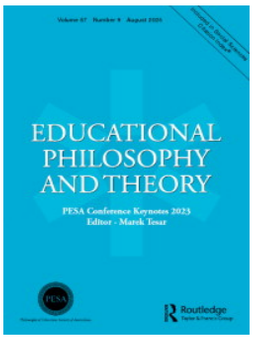

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Reclaiming university sovereignty: The case for Universocracy

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ABSTRACT

University communities have strayed from their democratic essence, breaching their social contract with society and prompting necessary calls for scrutiny. Students and faculty worldwide are protesting, highlighting this breach. Through a Rousseauian lens, this paper shows the breach occurs due to neoliberalism's use of managerialism to usurp the rightful university sovereign body: academics, students, professional staff, and other university citizens. Managerialism infiltrates university management structures that should represent the sovereign body and make decisions based on the general will of the community. Instead, it prioritizes self-interest and the commercial sector. In a Rousseauian sense, universities fail to uphold their legitimate sovereignty. We propose a Rousseauian solution and introduce the concept of 'Universocracy' to demonstrate how democratic universities can operate. This framework insists that universities should be governed democratically rather than by a small group of executive managers driven by managerialism and commercial interests. Universocracy presents an alternative governance approach, challenging the false belief that there are no alternatives to managerialism. This shift is crucial to ensure higher education continues to fulfil its social contract through a rightful sovereign body of knowledgeable and empowered university citizens.

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Introduction

It is well understood that universities, once bastions of knowledge and enlightenment, have been colonised by managerialism driven by profit-driven neoliberal and managerial agendas (Conway, 2019; Marginson, 2011; Wheeldon, 2022). One way managerialism sustains itself is through university executive management manipulating the underlying power structures of the university environment, which oppresses the university community (Margetts et al., 2024). Academics who are meant to be the guardians of these institutions, struggle for legitimacy due to the disregard for the contextual factors that make universities truly serve their purpose (Connell, 2019;

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Haski-Leventhal, 2020; Klikauer, 2015). This breaches the social contract between universities and society, which stipulates universities should function as social places with the capacity, capability, and willingness to educate citizens, and to create and disseminate knowledge (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019; Maassen, 2014; Marginson, 2011).

Executive management is failing in their duty to safeguard the university community's general will, yielding instead to the influence of managerialism (Deem, 2001; Marginson, 2011; Tight, 2019), in an effort to direct and control university operations for their own benefit and that of the corporate sector which harms the university community (Klikauer, 2023; Wheeldon, 2022). In response to the significant damage caused by this infiltration of managerialism, a growing movement to renegotiate this social contract has emerged as an act of hope and resistance (Maassen, 2014; Margetts et al., 2024).

In analysing the social contract of universities, the concept of sovereignty determines the locus of the general will and, consequently, the authority vested within the social contract. Drawing upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau's perspective, we contend that legitimate sovereignty lies within the university community itself, encompassing academics, professional staff, students, and other members of the collective body. It is this community that inherently possesses the authority as the sovereign body. However, the current situation has witnessed executive management illegitimately asserting sovereignty, thereby usurping the general will of the legitimate sovereign body, albeit with the passive acceptance of the university community.

According to Rousseau's principles, executive managers should serve as mere conduits for implementing the general will of the university community, acting strictly in accordance with the community's consent and devoid of any autonomous authority. In this regard, the University Assembly emerges as a vital mechanism through which the university community can exercise its sovereignty and safeguard the general will, while simultaneously providing guidance and direction to university management. The present situation falls short of this ideal.

A proposed solution to this breach is presented in the concept of 'Universocracy', which is a system that promotes and upholds the necessary structures that allow for its democratisation by recognising its inherent sovereignty. These structures, currently removed or hidden by managerial control, are essential for true democratic governance. The paper emphasises the importance of universities being governed democratically, as opposed to being governed by a small group of executive managers who prioritise managerialism and commercial interests. This managerial approach undermines education's function as an instrument of human development, which is to produce knowledgeable and engaged citizens.

An oppressed university community

Around the world, managerialism has colonised universities with irrefutable destruction (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Macfarlane & Jefferson, 2022; Parker et al., 2023). Consequently, the university community has been oppressed in a manner that prevents the full recognition of the impact of this situation, which is what maintains the dominance of managerialism (van Houtum & van Uden, 2022; Wheaton, 2020). This is explained in greater detail below, but first it is essential to comprehend the dynamics of

oppression. Freire (1970) is helpful in explaining how an oppressed community becomes domesticated due to the powerlessness and the overwhelming struggle of the current situation. For oppression to be overcome, one must first develop a critical understanding of its causes, which in turn reveals transformative actions that can create a new situation.

When knowledge is controlled and inaccessible, the oppressed are led into accepting their subordinate status, and the status quo remains an unchallenged normality (Freire, 1970; Kromydas, 2017). In the context of the managerialised university, one method of oppression is executive management's control over the mechanisms of institutional governance and, by extension, the underlying power and knowledge structures. To accomplish this managerialism works through executive managers who have an appropriately shaped managerialised habitus (Croucher et al., 2020; Heffernan, 2021; Winter, 2009). This ensures power structures are maintained within the executive body. The strategy of controlling institutional governance, enables executives to exclude the university community from crucial governance mechanisms such as policy development, implementation, enactment, and review (Margetts et al., 2024). Due to this exclusion from governance mechanisms, the university community is unable to question the actions of executive managers. The benefit to these executives is in the shaping of their own careers through the creation of more complex corporate structures, whereas universities receive diminishing benefits (Croucher & Woelert, 2022).

As long as the oppressed struggle with and accept their powerlessness, and as long as they feel incapable of taking the risks associated with resistance, oppression will persist (Freire, 1970). Critically, current events around the world demonstrate a growing awareness and willingness among university communities to acknowledge that universities are not fulfilling their role as a public good, or their accountability to the university community. As a result, demonstrations of resistance are emerging. With it comes the awareness, capability, and necessity of change (Chapman et al., 2019; Margetts et al., 2024; van Houtum & van Uden, 2022; Wheeldon, 2022). This is demonstrated by the calls to renegotiate the social contract of universities (Maassen, 2014).

Sovereignty and the social contract

Throughout history, philosophers have explored the concept of sovereignty and its implications for the social contract. Jean Bodin (1576) defined sovereignty as the supreme and absolute power within a state, residing in the ruler who enforces laws (Bodin, 1576/2009). Thomas Hobbes (1651) expanded on this, arguing people must surrender some natural rights to establish a social contract and avoid anarchy (Hobbes, 1651/2022). John Locke (1689) shifted the focus to the people, asserting that they create the state to protect their natural rights (Locke, 1687/1988). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1968) furthered this idea, stating that sovereignty resides in the people and that the government or sovereign is the instrument through which the people (the state) exercise their general will and, consequently, their sovereignty. He argued that the social contract obliges the government to rule in a manner that safeguards the interests of the sovereign body.

According to Rousseau, the social pact is the agreement by which individuals come together to form the collective body, or sovereign. Under the authority of this sovereign body, individual actions are unified to create and uphold laws and practices that ensure the common good and the preservation of all members. Continuous participation in the social pact is crucial for maintaining its legitimacy, as members are obligated to fulfil their duties to continue enjoying the benefits of the common good, their liberties, and the security and stability of the community. The social contract is based on this social pact between the sovereign body (those who are governed) and those in whom they invest their sovereignty (those who govern),whom he refers to as 'the sovereign' (Rousseau, 1762/1968).

In the context of universities, the sovereign body is comprised of university citizens, including academics, students, professional staff, and other university citizens. A social pact in this context is the agreement by which all members come together to form the collective body, or sovereign community comprising the constituency. Under the authority of this collective body, individual actions are unified to create and uphold policies and practices that ensure the common good and the well-being of all members. Continuous participation in this social pact is crucial for maintaining its legitimacy. Members are obligated to fulfil their roles and responsibilities to continue enjoying the benefits of the common good, their academic freedoms, and the security and stability of the university community.

The executive management of the university is compared to the government, as they are responsible for carrying out the will of the citizens. The University Assembly is viewed as the legislative body, where the general will is formed *through* deliberation, and is always committed to the common good. Therefore, it is the responsibility of university executive management to implement this general will.

The social contract of universities

Higher education's inherent purpose is to empower individuals to choose their own lives, with freedom and autonomy (Kromydas, 2017). Universities are integrated into communities and serve as guardians of reason, inquiry, philosophical openness, truth, and are responsible for the production, transmission, and study of knowledge (for example Barnett, 2005; Connell, 2019; Haski-Leventhal, 2020; Marginson, 2011). However, the current socio-political environment in which universities operate has resulted in strained ties and crises between higher education and society, as neoliberal political goals have driven universities to operate under the economic regimes of commercialisation and marketisation (Deem, 2004; Maassen, 2014; Marginson, 2013; Smyth, 2020; Tight, 2019). Universities are evolving into organisations that increasingly resemble business enterprises with privately aligned operations, contrary to their fundamental public good obligations (Lea, 2011; Marginson, 2011; van Houtum & van Uden, 2022). Scholars who have observed these modifications to this social contract have called for its renegotiation (Denning, 1997; Kwiek, 2005; Martin, 2003). As Maassen (2014, p. 35) notes, a proposal for a new social contract 'implies that its "old" one is no longer actually in place and needs to be (re)negotiated'.

Article 26 of The Declaration of Human Rights (2022) states that everyone should have equal access to higher education. The fourth goal of the United Nations'

Sustainable Development Goals is to provide inclusive and equitable quality education that creates opportunities for lifelong learning for all (United Nations, 2022). This call is reinforced by global organisations who also advocate for reform. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) asserts that a new social contract for higher education based on human rights principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity must be forged urgently. And this urgency is due to radical disruptions and societal transformations that are destined to affect environmental sustainability, social justice, and inclusion (UNESCO, 2022).

Demonstrations of the breach in the social contract

The breach of the social contract is not merely a theoretical concept, it manifests in a practical and globally observable way in student and faculty behaviours. The practices and events documented below are representative of actions occurring in a number of countries and indicate not only the magnitude of the breach, but also that the university citizenry (the sovereign body) is becoming increasingly aware of it.

Managerialism undermines the viability of academic work

Academics are increasingly unable to adapt to a climate that actively undermines academic freedom and autonomy, coupled with intensified work conditions with unattainable performance standards (for example Aprile et al., 2021; Heffernan, 2021; Heffernan & Bosetti 2021; Macfarlane, 2005; van Houtum & van Uden, 2022). Academics are unable to access the university's operational mechanisms in the managerialised environment (Wheeldon et al., 2022b) and they experience an academic identity crisis as they struggle to compete for recognition and legitimacy under increasing pressure (Lust et al., 2019; Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022).

Academics are frequently confronted with microaggressions and anxiety on a daily basis as they struggle to meet increasingly extravagant and impossible performance expectations (Jones et al., 2020). As a show of global resistance academics are engaged in industrial action. In 2020, academics from 74 British universities went on strike to protest issues of poor pay and benefits, equity, excessive workloads, and the growing use of casual labour (van Houtum & van Uden, 2022). Similarly, in Ontario Canada, academics protested harsh working conditions, precarious employment, and rising fears of government authoritarianism eroding education (Giroux & Paul, 2022; Ross et al., 2022).

In 2021, *via* social media, German academics protested the Academic Fixed Term Contract Act, which limits the duration of contracts for early career researchers. Protesting academics contend that these laws are a waste of public funds, create unstable working conditions, and are detrimental to society, research, and individual researchers (Bahr et al., 2021). In 2022, hundreds of academics in Queensland, Australia engaged in industrial action to demand better pay and working conditions (National Tertiary Education Union, 2022).

The emphasis on academic productivity as measured by metrics such as the H Index and impact factors, contributes to the culture of hyper-performance in academia.

Research is produced not for its value to society but for its ability to be published, which fosters internal competition, leading to plagiarism and falsified research (Chapman et al., 2019; Macfarlane, 2021; Stöckelová, 2014). This culture has resulted in the development and growth of a multi-billion dollar privatised and predatory publication industry (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2019) that benefits at the expense of the academic community and society as a whole. As a demonstrable reaction against this predatory behaviour, in 2023, over forty scientists resigned en masse from the editorial board of a leading scientific journal owned by the publishing giant Elsevier who refused to reduce publication fees despite reported profit margins of nearly 40% in 2019 (The Guardian, 2023).

Students protest against de-prioritising learning

As students around the world become increasingly aware that universities devalue their democratic right to education across any and all disciplines, they have begun to protest and petition universities. This student activism, according to Cole and Heinecke (2020), is a push for universities to prioritise community and justice over economic agendas.

In 2010, the announcement of the closure of the philosophy department at Middlesex University sparked widespread protests from students and academics, with claims that such actions threaten the intellectual life of the United Kingdom (The Guardian, 2010). Similar protests occurred in 2011 at the University of Greenwich when over 1000 students signed a petition to prevent the closure of its philosophy department.

In a country already known for having some of the highest tuition fees in the world, large-scale student protests in Chile in 2011 denounced rising student debt and limited access to quality higher education (Guzmán-Concha, 2017). Similarly in South Africa thousands of students protested for greater access to higher education and against inadequate and declining government funding (Wangenge-Ouma, 2021).

In 2015, students at more than 80 American universities protested against racial injustice on their campuses. They reported experiencing microaggressions directed at minority students in the classroom, which reinforced racist attitudes. One incident that sparked protests was when a minority student was referred to as a 'savage' by university management after describing her 'savage hunt' for knowledge (The New York Times, 2015, para 2). Another instance occurred at the University of Missouri, where university leaders were given the title 'Master'. This title was eventually dropped due to its association with slavery (The New York Times, 2015, para 25).

Protests against institutional identity loss

Branding and rebranding of universities is an objectification and monetisation of the academic reputation of institutions (Wernick, 2006). The identity of higher education institutions is tied to the highly personal contact students and faculty have with the institute over extended periods of time (Clark et al., 2020), and the corporatised activity of rebranding frequently generates resistance. For example in 2022, 1400

students from an Australian university signed an online petition protesting the rebranding and renaming of their university, citing the university's lack of consultation and their emotional attachment to the previous brand (change.org, 2022; The Chronicle, 2022). Another Australian university encountered a similar backlash when the Student Union was rebranded and renamed with the same name as a pornographic website, which the majority of students deemed unacceptable (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2022). Even Oxford University is not immune, with faculty describing a rebranding exercise as 'right-sizing' exercises and 'internationalisation programmes', resulting in 'harried academics forced to deal with a wall of bureaucracy that is being constructed form-by-form, between them and their students' (Ponton, 2020, p. 662).

Students' learning is harmed when they are treated as consumers

In today's student-as-customer environment, the treatment of students as customers has a negative impact on their education and learning (Raaper, 2019; Wright & Greenwood, 2017). This 'customerisation' of students results in the insertion of a layer of neoliberal and managerial agendas between the student and the academic (Ponton, 2020). The centralisation of student support functions performed by professional staff hinders the ability of academics to interact with students and enables managerialism to direct and control these interactions (Wheeldon et al., 2022a). In order to keep their 'customers' (students) satisfied, academics are pressured to become 'entertainers' rather than 'facilitators' of quality learning and teaching (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020, p. 1229).

Corporations reject the legitimacy of universities

The current political emphasis on labour market-driven policies in higher education, positions it as an ordinary marketplace and not an inclusive instrument of human development (Kromydas, 2017; Parker, 2018). Instead of emphasising the acquisition of knowledge, the funding policies of universities around the world are centred on skill-based instruction (Choi, 2019; Department of Education, 2020; McCowan, 2015). Scholars argue that critical pedagogy offers an alternative approach to education by emphasising the importance of challenging current paradigms and fostering critical thinking in terms of its role in extending thought, resistance, and action against the most crucial problems of the day (Apple et al., 2022). Fisher (2009, p. 21) positions this as 'reflexive impotence'. This is evidenced by the expansion of the open education industry, in which alternative, private providers rapidly deliver online content in competition *with* universities (Marginson, 2006; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). These providers do not operate in the same regulated environment as universities and may produce inferior learning outcomes (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). The proliferation of unregulated microcredentials is an example of this (Oliver, 2019).

Universocracy: An alternative blueprint

Sovereignty, in the context of university governance and academic freedom, is not something that is automatically given or already established. Instead, it must be actively

claimed and maintained by the academic community. Today, managerialism has usurped this sovereignty. Universocracy seeks to restore the university community's legitimate sovereignty, aligning with Rousseauian principles that emphasize the collective will of the people. Currently, universities are dominated by neoliberal and managerial ideologies that have fostered a toxic management culture, perpetuated by the illusion that the current state of affairs is synonymous with academia, when it is not (Watermeyer et al., 2025). As these ideologies have colonized universities, they have removed or obscured the structures that enable the sovereign body to exercise its will, making it difficult to envision or recognize alternative governance models.

In recent decades, the role of executive managers such as Vice Chancellors has shifted to resemble that of a CEO, chosen for their management skills rather than their scholarly knowledge and leadership abilities (Deem, 2004; Heffernan, 2021). Moreover, governing boards are increasingly composed of individuals with corporate and financial experience (Croucher et al., 2020; Shore & Davidson, 2014) that hides the democratic and academic structures needed to moderate powerful managerial values (Margetts et al., 2024). When university reforms are implemented without considering the opinions, autonomy, and academic needs of the university citizens (the sovereign body), the current trend of prioritizing business-like operations and corporate interests over the needs of society persists.

To address this, the disbanding of current governance structures is proposed to make way for a 'University Assembly' that acts as the highest decision-making body, comprising elected members from all constituencies of the sovereign body. This structure upholds the Rousseauian principle that sovereignty resides in the collective will of the people, which cannot be divided or fragmented. Therefore, all aspects of governance must include representatives of the diverse whole, ensuring the general will is faithfully represented and acted upon.

The cultivation of knowledgeable and actively engaged university citizens is central to Universocracy, emphasizing the necessary active participation of the university community in decision-making processes. It is important to emphasize that the democratic obligation to engage in the interests of one's community, and for the good of the sovereign body, differs from the forced actions imposed by managerialism. This demand arises because 'the commitment which binds us to the social body is obligatory only because they are mutual' (Rousseau, 1762/1968, p. 75). Therefore, the active engagement and input of all members of the university community are crucial. By necessity, this obligation requires the maintenance of structures that enable sovereign action. Currently, however, the voice of the university community is often 'managed out' in favour of managerial outcomes (Heffernan, 2024; Margetts et al., 2024). This results from the current disproportionate ability of managers and executives to shape the university environment according to managerial ideology.

Under Universocracy, leaders are elected through clear and transparent criteria, allowing all eligible members of the university citizenry to nominate candidates. Public forums ensure the scrutiny of candidates' qualifications and backgrounds, reinforcing the legitimacy of the elected officials. The University Assembly, sets agendas, reviews performance, and oversees the democratic processes within the university, not executive leaders. Authority is then delegated to the executive for operational purposes.

Term limits for leadership roles ensure the renewal of leadership diversity, distributed leadership across the sovereign body, and the ability to remove leaders who fail to uphold the general will. Elected leadership is not confined to the highest executive levels but extends to subordinate leaders such as heads of schools and departments, and research centre directors, who are elected by their respective constituencies. Once elected, these leaders appoint subordinate roles (e.g. administrative staff, academic leads, etc.) within their units based on merit and in consultation with their constituencies. These leaders remain accountable to the University Assembly for the performance of those they appoint, ensuring that the general will of the university community is consistently represented and enacted.

Participatory and deliberative mechanisms that uphold Universocracy include open consultations, such as regular town hall meetings and opportunities for continuous input from the university community. Transparent referendums ensure that major decisions reflect the collective will. Inclusive participation is prioritized, with efforts made to include diverse and dissenting opinions through community-driven agendas for public deliberations. These processes are overseen by the University Office of Democratic Governance (UODG), ensuring fairness, transparency, and accountability.

Implementation steps

As this paper has demonstrated, the current system imposed by neoliberalism and managerialism is not what university citizens would have chosen had they been asked. It runs counter to the fundamental mission and purpose of universities, which is to promote education, knowledge creation, philosophical openness, and critical thought. To shift from one management state to another requires an interlocking set of structures and practices that allow for adaptation to a new, altered worldview (Laloux, 2018).

In Universocracy, this begins with the dissolution of existing structures such as the Council, Senate, Academic Board, and all university leadership roles, to make way for the formation of the University Assembly with elected representatives from the sovereign body. The University Assembly appoints a Director of the University Office of Democratic Governance (UODG), who is responsible for developing an independent electoral office to oversee elections and appointments. The Director of the UODG is accountable to the University Assembly, not to the executive leaders. Once the University Assembly has appointed the Director, elections are held to choose the executive leaders. Subsequently, subordinate leaders such as heads of schools, departments, and research centres are elected by the constituents of their respective units. Executive leaders do not control these appointments, ensuring that the selection process remains democratic and representative of the general will of the university community.

Leadership positions are clearly defined, with open nominations encouraged from all eligible members. Public forums and discussions with candidates ensure scrutiny before conducting fair and transparent elections, overseen by the independent electoral office. This process includes the election of subordinate leaders. Alongside these elections, term limits are implemented and enforced. For example, a leader can serve no more than two consecutive terms of four years each, with a mandatory break before running again. This ensures the renewal of leadership, diversity, and the

distribution of leadership across the sovereign body, maintaining the integrity and responsiveness of the university's governance.

A final word

It is perhaps tempting at this point to dismiss Universocracy as an impossibility, given the entrenched dominance of the current ideologies governing universities. Yet, history shows us that societal worldviews can and do evolve, reshaping institutions and organizations (Laloux, 2018). The illusion of intractability is precisely how these ideologies perpetuate themselves - by convincing us there are no alternatives.

The widespread protests and grievances erupting within universities serve as a powerful testament and catalyst for rethinking how universities should operate and fulfil their public mission. Globally, academics, students, and government bodies continue to vehemently voice concerns, spotlighting a range of issues that starkly contravene the social contract between universities and society.

These protestations reveal a fundamental Rousseauian truth. The sovereign body of the university resides in the collective voices and actions of its community, its academics, professional staff, and students. Through their unified resistance, the legitimacy of their authority becomes undeniable. The protests focus on critical issues: the erosion of academic freedom and autonomy, the deterioration of democratic education, unsustainable working conditions, the imposition of unrealistic performance standards, the inadequacy of government funding for higher education, and rampant institutional greed. Each act of defiance highlights the vital assertion that the sovereign body of the university has the power to demand change and to safeguard the principles and values that uphold the social contract of higher education.

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