

Aeron Davis (Ed.), **The Death of Public Knowledge?: How Free Markets Destroy the General Intellect**, London: Goldsmiths' Press, 2017, 280 pp., \$28.00 (hardcover).

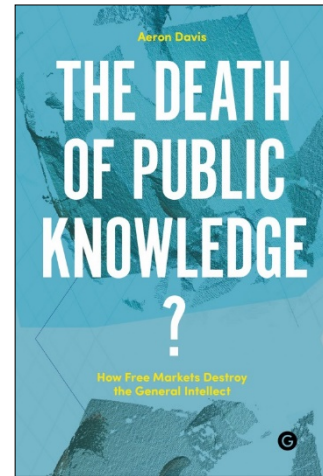
Reviewed by

Niall P. Stephens

Framingham State University, USA

In May 2018, after London-based tabloid journalists denounced a front-page *New York Times*' report on the effects of austerity on the northern English town of Prescott, Patrick Maguire (2018) noted in the British *New Statesman*,

serious discussion about the real, human impact of cuts can't and shouldn't be litigated like this, with faraway places used as footfalls by people working backwards from more or less static ideological premises. It's the voices and experiences of local people that matter—but with places like Prescott less and less likely to have dedicated media of their own, amplifying them is ever more difficult. (para. 13)



Whether or not the *New York Times* reporting on Prescott was deficient, austerity is clearly changing the quality of the public sphere. The blunt message of Aeron Davis's edited volume, **The Death of Public Knowledge?**, is that this change is for the worse.

Davis is the director of the Political Economy Research Centre (PERC) at Goldsmiths' College, which first commissioned the 16 chapters compiled here under the theme of "the economics of public knowledge" (p. ix). The theme apparently shifted from money to mortality—from the economics of public knowledge to its death—because all the papers coincided in observing "a very real erosion of the kinds of information, media and public knowledge that are considered essential for polities, markets and societies to function properly" (pp. ix–x). Knowledge, or at least information, is the administrative and organizational lifeblood of modern societies.

As one of the book's contributors, Colin Leys, notes, Davis's introduction takes too much for granted with respect to what specifically *public* knowledge might be. Different people have different ideas of what it means for polities, markets, and societies to "function properly." So what exactly is essential here? For Davis, *public* knowledge seems to be a kind of democratic social capital, a resource that has been undermined by austerity, and by the anti-statist neoliberal ideology whose persistence—after deregulated capitalism had to be saved from collapse by state intervention in 2008—austerity represents. A stirringly subtitled "Conclusion: Manifesto for Public Knowledge," by Des Freedman and Justin Schlosberg, is much more specific than Davis's introduction. Freedman and Schlosberg call public knowledge

a classic “public good”: a phenomenon that is “non-rivalrous” in the sense that one person’s consumption does not limit anyone else’s enjoyment and in that its social benefit is maximised the more people have access to it.... We are concerned that public goods are being circumscribed by their for-profit counterparts. (p. 244)

The 16 case studies sandwiched between Davis’s introduction and Freedman and Schlosberg’s conclusion make it clear that this concern is justified. Contributor Philip Augar says investment banks “know more about the state of the world economy than any other public or private organization” (p. 146). Bong-hyun Lee argues that Korean *chaebol* conglomerates have a greater say over economic policy than the South Korean state itself. Andrew McGettigan attributes the way British higher education funding relies increasingly on student loans rather than subsidies to Milton Friedman’s notion that education’s value is exclusively about private individuals’ economic earning power, rather than any broader common good. Colin Leys examines the privatization of policy coordinating in Britain’s National Health Service, concluding poignantly that, “even if there was a shared willingness to seek objective answers” to questions about the costs of the healthcare system, “neither the data required nor adequate resources to study them any longer exist” (p. 239).

The chapters are grouped into four separate sections, each preceded by a few pages of introductory remarks by Davis. Britain is the focus throughout, with the second section dedicated entirely to “public knowledge in Britain.” The chapters in the other three sections reflect Britain’s global context, as discussion extends overseas to the Republic of Ireland, Korea, the United States, New Zealand, Greece, and supranational or globalized spaces: the “Africa” constituted by NGOs and the BBC; the comparative researcher’s category of “Western democratic states”; and international currency markets.

The first section is about journalism and media industries; the second comprises chapters on educational institutions, public libraries, and legal aid; the third section is about knowledge and information in the financial industry; and the chapters in the fourth section discuss the encroachment of private interests into public policymaking. The trajectory set up by this arrangement is compelling: from the demise of John Reith’s spirit of “public service” broadcasting to the way, in Davis’s words, “Everywhere one looks . . . the policy making process has been captured by vested interests” (p. 185).

In this way, the first half of the book is taken up with discussions of the workings of ideological state apparatuses. Then the third section—about the financial industry—neatly illustrates knowledge as an administrative resource from which power, in its most liquid form, flows. The diverse discussions about the entanglement of power and knowledge in the fourth section seem to suggest, like the book as a whole, that public knowledge is simultaneously ideological and administrative. Michel Foucault and Francis Bacon were both right: Knowledge expresses power, and power expresses knowledge.

As Leys’ comments about the National Health Service imply, there is something counterfeit or specious about the former kind of knowledge. Ideology is a form of ignorance as much as knowledge. Likewise, Roger Smith’s discussion of cuts to civil legal aid (public funding for legal representation in civil suits) describes costs as well as savings, as legal proceedings slow down, and access to legal protection is attenuated. A lack of data on such costs means that, in the words of the government’s own National Accounting Office, the cuts “cannot be said to have delivered better overall value for money for the taxpayer”

(p. 120). Here, as elsewhere in the book, laissez-faire ideology seems to fill in gaps in empirical knowledge that are themselves the result of priorities and policies established according to ideological principles.

What is dying (or in danger of dying) is itself an ideological construct, which is to say an imaginary entity: the democratic public, whose existence depends not just on shared administrative knowledge, but upon an idea of itself as separate from and in some ways transcendent over narrow private interests. The modern right has been campaigning against this idea at least since Margaret Thatcher famously pronounced that there is no such thing as society. Meanwhile, Davis says, the intangibility of knowledge makes it less important than material resources to most on the left. Yet the "materialist" left has long been fascinated with ideology. More recently, the left has become preoccupied with the intangibles of culture and identity, though such concerns are not prominent in this book.

Austerity reflects neoliberalism's ideology of "small government," but government has not become smaller in size, only smaller in its democratic ambition. Contributor Ken Jones describes how a drive to convert British schools to "academies" transfers assets and administration into private hands while simultaneously strengthening the role of the central government in educational policy. State power persists, it just does not serve the public interest in the way it did during the social-democratic postwar decades. Rupert Murdoch—who embodies the consequences for media industries of the move away from social democracy—was perfectly in tune with Thatcher when he recast the "public interest" as "what interests the public" (p. 233). Such notions permit government to become just another lever for private power.

This book is most important, perhaps, for the insight it offers into the prehistory of the new "post-truth," populist politics in Britain and beyond. Unified around the theme that the kind of knowledge that sustains democracy is receding, the contributors offer diverse, grounded studies of how this is happening. The book will be of interest to students of neoliberal antipolitics and its populist sequel at all levels across the social sciences. Because of its empirical seriousness, it deserves to be taken seriously even by those who, like the London journalists who attacked *The New York Times* reporting on Prescott, do not share Davis's skepticism of market fundamentalism.

What seems to be missing from the book is a chapter on digital technology's role in the death of public knowledge. The omission is underlined by Davis's acknowledgment of this role in his introduction, and by the fact that, along with rejecting market fundamentalism, Freedman and Schlosberg's manifesto calls for confronting digital technology—both by reassessing the ideology of its beneficence and by confronting the new patterns of gatekeeping it has constituted. It is striking that, in response to the new populism, all of these reassessments appear to be underway.

While austerity represents the persistence of a neoliberal policy agenda, the role of ideology in sustaining such policies seems to be fading. Unlike neoliberalism, populism is not an ideology. Its coherence is emotional rather than rational, and it has no need for conceptual consistency. Given what *The Death of Public Knowledge?* documents in wide-ranging detail, it is not surprising that the politics ascendant today has little need for knowledge at all.

### References

- Maguire, P. (2018, May 29). The row over *The New York Times's* depiction of austerity Britain misses the point. *The New Statesman*. Retrieved from <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/05/row-over-new-york-times-s-depiction-austerity-britain-misses-point>