

FORUM



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: [overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/](http://overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/).

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## Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

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## The universities of Manchester and Helsinki: Different paths

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**ABSTRACT:** Comparing the experience of neoliberal reform at the Universities of Manchester and Helsinki shows that not all forms of neoliberalization are the same, despite the similarities in structural changes. In this case, the key difference has to do with the the social value attached to the content of scholarship, and to what universities do. In Manchester, the reforms were in the name of trying to achieve excellence, full stop; in Helsinki, the reforms were in the name of trying to achieve excellence *for a reason*: to better serve scholarship and the social good. This difference suggests that there is nothing inevitable about neoliberal reform: the outcome is contingent, and that generates hope.

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Not all neoliberal reforms are the same: that is the key lesson I have learned by working both in the Universities of Manchester and Helsinki in recently years.

In 2015, I was asked by the Head of Social Research at the University of Helsinki to give a talk for a Finnish audience about the UK's concept of "Impact" in the Research Excellence Framework 2014 (REF). I had moved to Helsinki in 2012. Keijo Rahkonen, the head of Social Research, said that he thought an audit of "research impact" might be introduced in Finland, and it would be good to compare the British experience.

At the time, there was a sense within the University of Helsinki that the university structure had been becoming neoliberal since 2010. That was the year the Finnish Government passed the new University Law which, people told me, "privatised" the universities. Coming from the UK, it seemed to me like a very mild form of privatization: all students still attended university for free (even overseas students); Finnish students still received grants from the government on which to live; and the government still paid almost all the costs of running universities. What had changed was that universities now managed their own budgets, were responsible for their own buildings, staff were no longer civil servants, academic tenure no longer existed, and a part of people's salaries would be assessed by performance.

I had arrived at Helsinki after 17 years of being employed by the University of Manchester, which had been pursuing a strong and explicitly neoliberal path since 2004, when Alan Gilbert became its Vice Chancellor and (at his request) the university's President as well. Gilbert had come from Australia, and had attempted, but failed, to create a fully privatised section of the University of Melbourne while he was there<sup>1</sup>.

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1. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan\\_Gilbert\\_\(Australian\\_academic\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Gilbert_(Australian_academic))

The University of Helsinki felt nothing like the kind of neoliberalism I had experienced under Gilbert's leadership at Manchester. The staff had been subjected to every kind of audit – teaching audits, research audits, even admin audits; every part of our work had been business-process re-engineered, so that everything we did was assessed for levels of successful, efficient, and timely performance. Students had to provide so much feedback about their lecturers' performance, and so frequently, that they were becoming tired of it. The amount of money spent on rebranding the university appeared to be the equivalent of the costs of running a small department. Many of us were put in newly built buildings that had open plan designs and little bookshelf space, apparently intended to increase interaction and transparency. Many of the staff and students believed it was actually to save money, and to increase surveillance.

The University of Manchester – or at least the School of Social Sciences in which I worked (nobody really knew what happened in other schools) - also introduced a variety of monetary targets, calculating annual “contributions” per discipline. “Contribution” was the word used to mean clear profit, after all the costs of employment, buildings, secretarial support, equipment, and so on, had been deducted. Even when disciplines were making a profit, if the average profit made by each member of staff was not meeting the target, that counted as failure. For the first time in my academic career, I began to become aware of the costs of teaching students, as the relationship between the time spent with students against the money they earned for the university was made explicit. Apparently, we should not give students more time than they are worth; but at the same time, we were exhorted to always answer students' emails and mark their work thoroughly and on time, because the students need to say they are satisfied with our service to them. There was also constant, endless, reorganization of administration structures and systems, and constant renaming of disciplinary units and attempts to merge them with others.

Things moved so far away from what we had understood higher education to be that many of us wondered how things had ever got to that stage with so few expressions of alarm about the systematic breaking down of what many of us saw as the essential basis for scholarship: the classic Humboldt model of the nurturing of a community of peers whose commitment was based on the idea of scholarship as a vocation rather than a job; whose work would be shared freely with other scholars so that it could be tested, critiqued and built upon by others; and in which teaching was a means to encourage young people to learn how to think, not what to think. All of that began to feel and sound faintly naïve, but the precise moment when it became so was unclear.

Despite all this, Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester remained one of the best anthropology units in the UK, and I thoroughly enjoyed working within that research environment and I still miss my colleagues. Yet that was despite the university's reforms, not because of them. Of course, there were some positive changes: nobody gave the same lectures for thirty years anymore; marking of exams became much more rigorous, so there was a reduction of gender and ethnicity bias; and PhD

students were managing to finish their doctorates on time more often than not. Of course the arrangements in the pre-reform era needed improvement, and many of those improvements have now been made; but I am not convinced that turning the University of Manchester into a neoliberal industrial site was the best way to make those improvements. I am certain it was not the only way to make them.

So when I arrived in Helsinki in 2012, the Finnish neoliberal experiment there felt to me like it had either hardly begun or was something completely different from what I had experienced in the UK. By 2015, when I was asked to present a paper on “the impact of Impact” on university research environments, I had concluded it was indeed something different. On the surface, the University of Helsinki might appear to be going down the same path: social sciences was moved to another building, much of which is open plan; the new rector changed the university’s statutes so as to centralise power to himself and would take increasing control over the appointment of deans and heads of department; the need to meet targets has been increasingly emphasised; and the complete reorganization of the administration and degree structures have been implemented at such speed over the last year that people have hardly had time to catch their breath.

That last set of changes coincided with a newly elected national government that radically cut the budgets of Finnish universities, and the University of Helsinki’s budget in particular. The drop in income was so big, the university’s rector said, that he had no choice but to downsize the university. This was despite the fact that the university made a hefty profit in 2015. By the time the paper I presented in 2015 was published, less than a year after I presented it (Green 2016), more than 500 staff had been laid off, including the administrator of Social and Cultural Anthropology, who had worked for the discipline for over twenty years. Most of these staff were administrative employees, but there were also a few academic staff, including full professors, who lost their jobs. Nothing that dramatic had ever occurred in one fell swoop at the University of Manchester. The entire staff at the University of Helsinki was in a state of shock about it by the time the summer recess arrived in 2016.

Yet it would be a serious error to assume that there is anything either inevitable, or inevitably the same, in the way such reforms have been implemented in Manchester and Helsinki. Despite the structural similarities of the reforms, there is something distinctly different about the value and significance of universities being expressed at Helsinki, from all sides of the debate, both those in favour of the reforms and those against. Of course the official rhetoric speaks of excellence, of trying to climb up international league tables, of the need to win ever more research money. Yet there is still an unwavering commitment to scholarship as an end in itself at Helsinki; more importantly, there appears to be a wider popular commitment to the idea that higher education is the means by which more equal opportunities are achieved in Finland. And universities are still also widely seen as a major source of attempting to do good for society (indeed, that is still written into the mission statement of the University of Helsinki).

What has happened at Helsinki over the last year, both in terms of layoffs and in terms of structural change, has shaken everyone to the core, and nobody knows, as yet, what the outcome will be. And that uncertainty provides a space for intervention. What appears fairly certain is that it will not be the same path as Manchester has taken. The Finnish university system has the opportunity, and the values, to take its own route to reform, and I am hoping to be there to help that happen.

#### REFERENCES

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