

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/.

Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

Edited by

Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI

Contributions of

Cris SHORE & Susan WRIGHT, Vintilă MIHĂILESCU, Sarah GREEN, Gabriela VARGAS-CETINA & Steffan Igor AYORA-DIAZ, Tracey HEATHERINGTON, Dimitris DALAKOGLU, Noelle MOLÉ LISTON, Susana NAROTZKY, Jaro STACUL, Meredith WELCH-DEVINE, Jon P. MITCHELL.

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Do not become an idiot: A comment on neoliberalism and labour relationships within higher education

Dimitris DALAKOGLU

Vrije University Amsterdam

ABSTRACT: As neoliberalism takes over academia, there is struggle going on. This is a struggle to keep the academic institutions as free as possible from “idiotic” (i.e. self-interested) forms of behaviour and especially from reproducing socially and politically such practices.

When Bologna Process was initiated by the European governments promoting the neoliberal adjustment of academic sector in the continent, the focus of the protests that took place back then was the creation of the so-called university/super-market¹. The critique was that under the new paradigm the students will become consumers of the educational product and the corporations or the State will be the consumers of the research product. Moreover, these protests were also focusing on the wider social shift that neoliberal higher education implies. Namely higher education was not considered anymore a right of the society or a public good, but a luxury commodity requesting individual investment. People will buy education if they can afford it and this will be translated into higher income or personal development, and listed learning outcomes, which will be translated into analogous listed skills etc. However, an area which was not stressed enough by the protests was the shift that neoliberalism will bring to the labour relationships within academia.

This happened for a number of reasons. One of these reasons has, arguably, to do with the depoliticisation of academia. The majority of the workers in European academia did not participate that actively in those protests, on contrary to their students who revolted properly in some cases against the proposed shifts over the last two decades. Certainly, one can argue that since the 1990s there was a more general depoliticisation tendency in Europe. In our case, part of the problem was that academics at that time considered themselves a different class than other workers, and unfortunately some still do so. Many academics seem to think that they are immune to the material conditions of everyday life. Of course the fact that a proportion of the academics had decent salaries and decent working conditions in most of Europe contributed to that relative lack of protest. This is not the case anymore as academia becomes an increas-

1. A version of this text was presented in the invited plenary session of IUAES in May 2016 on the Future of Anthropology. I should thank Noel Salazar, Heather O’Leary and Rajko Mursic for putting together this session and the participants for their questions and comments. I also have to thank KULA the Slovenian Anthropological Association for hosting me.

ingly repressive work environment, both in terms of salaries and also in terms of social and political deregulation (see Bal, Grassiani, Kirk 2014; Mitchell, Dyck 2014; Afonso 2013; Dalakoglou 2012).

Today any newcomer in academia knows very well how neoliberalism is implemented in terms of labour relationships. Constant restructuring has deregulated the sector and put it in a permanent crisis, and thus a “state of exception”, which becomes the new technology of academic governance. However, one should separate two major dimensions: an institutional structure (e.g. proliferation of temporary contracts, redundancies, restructuring etc.) and the social one, consisting of people who are eager to implement or simply remain silent about such shifts. These human resources seem to be a key dimension of neoliberalism within academia and it is an issue that it is rarely addressed. It is a no-go zone since everyone working within the sector knows someone who has been involved in such activities. For instance one hears stories all the time about certain line managers who become the heavies of the neoliberal central management, or management teams who interchange between good cop-bad cop roles, we also hear cases about managers who blackmail psychologically or directly people who are below them in the academic food chain or about libel campaigns that are damaging not only within the particular institution but in smaller disciplines, they may make someone unemployed for ever. Quite often such practices are applied by certain bosses in order to make an example and intimidate the rest of the workers.

Part of the problem is that a lot of academic environments that adopt the neoliberal adjustments seem to borrow the worst elements from both worlds. So often, university environments keep the archaic and useless hierarchical structures of academia that go back to the Christian monastic punitive tradition, combined with informality and interpersonal face to face relationships and the dog-eat-dog of the neoliberal legacy. Overall, the problem with neoliberal governance of labour, within academia, is that it allows for abuse of power and bullying.

Nevertheless, the important issue is always the individuals who are eager to apply such practices in the everyday life of academic biotopes. The stories are repeated. Everyone knows of colleagues who exchange a promotion for a managerial role, for example, but they also happen to jump the fence overnight, finding themselves sitting comfortably on the side of neoliberal micro-management. Suddenly every senseless morosity that an external consultant of the central management wrote in a report (and the management now has to implement, since they paid the consultant 22 lecturers' salaries for a month's worth of work) is somehow justified by some of these former colleagues. The big university bosses who implement the worst neoliberal agendas, are portrayed by these former colleagues/now micro-line-managers as sympathetic parents who really have good intentions, but their hands are tied. If someone dares to say anything about e.g. the half million salaries of these big bosses and the junior faculty's salaries that are not enough even to pay their rent, they are automatically black-listed as a troublemaker who must be isolated and ousted by all means available by the certain

micro-bosses. After all, we are in a crisis and every exception can be justified in order to “save the discipline” or “the department” or even “social sciences” *per se*².

So the point is that such regimes of everyday bullying within the academic work environments must be actually applied by some people, and not resisted by others, in order for the neoliberal form of governance of labour to be materialised. These two kinds of people are the necessary idiots. And idiot-ness is what distinct someone who will get a position of power and will become a bully and someone who will not. As it is well known, the word idiot is etymologically linked with the word for private. Idiot therefore refers, more or less, to persons who care about their private interests rather than the wider good. It got its negative connotations thousands of years ago in Athens, when not caring about what was defined as the collective interests of the time and the public sphere was considered as one of the worst practices. Indeed, a problem with idiots who are involved in education is that they have a role in the production of knowledge and thus social reproduction. Unfortunately, gradually one can observe an increase in similar neoliberal idiotic ethics being reproduced in very junior levels. So for instance, we see PhD students who receive their PhDs and jump the fence. Now they must take care of their career and not protest too much, whilst stepping on the neck of someone else for professional progress is justified for X or Y reasons. One also witnesses PhD students who align themselves with certain powerful individuals who love power and are higher on the academic food-chain like that aforementioned type of idiots etc.

Thus we are running always the danger to reproduce entire cohorts of idiots, as students learn not only from what their teachers say but also from the ways they behave. This is a key dimension within the neoliberal academic world, as the system is being adjusted structurally in order to produce idiots. So it is almost entirely up to the groups of teachers how to navigate within the new paradigm so they do not become idiots themselves and their students learn how not to be idiots.

So it is of crucial importance to reproduce – from the most junior to the most senior levels – as few idiots as possible. Otherwise, they will take over one of the very last spheres of public life where there is some chance to reproduce socially and politically critical forms of behaviour and thought.

One can claim that self-interested practices were always present within academia before the shift to neoliberalism. Hierarchy, authoritarianism and bravado up have been, to a certain extent, historically embedded within academic world. However there is a qualitative difference in the age of neoliberalism. The system never before favoured so much the idiots (always per the original etymology referring to private self-interest oriented behaviour). And idiot-ness becomes a distinctive factor between the people who will be able to resist the repressive neoliberal adjustments in their daily practice within the university – irrelevant of their position within the hierarchy – and the ones who will turn into bullies as soon as they catch a position of power.

2. All cases used in this paper are random examples; any potential resemblance with real persons and real situations is accidental.

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