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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

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Anthropology for whom? Engaging students in the neoliberal academy

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Abstract: The article analyzes students' engagement in the neoliberal academy. It points to a paradox: while academic institutions set out to produce engaged and motivated students and instil in them a quest for knowledge, their increasingly high tuition fees are creating instead a disengaged student population whose main goal is to pay off accumulated debts.

Most anthropologists probably share Shore and Wright's view (2000: 57) that the rise of technologies of audit and accountability engender «new norms of conduct and professional behaviour» and create «new kinds of subjectivities». A lot has been written, in Anthropology and cognate disciplines, on the rise of audit culture after the neoliberal turn, and I do not think my thoughts will add anything new to what is already well known. However, I would like to contribute to the debate by asking a question: if audit technologies set out to create self-managing individuals who render themselves auditable, as Shore and Wright suggest, what kind of students does the auditable academy produce?

A few years ago, Gusterson (2011) shared his views on the consumer mentality and commodity logic that have become dominant among students in Anglophone universities on both sides of the Atlantic and reminded us that our task, as academics, is not simply the production of knowledge (in the form of publications, for example): we also have to communicate it to an audience which includes, inter alia, undergraduate students. At a time when a lot of pressure is put on academics to publish books and articles in refereed journals, teaching seems the least important task. Yet not all academic institutions are research-intensive, and the survival of many departments is conditional on sufficient student enrollments. An anthropologist who has published articles in prestigious journals or has put forward a fascinating theory, for example, cannot expect high enrollments if students find his/her language difficult, or if his/her expectations are higher than other colleagues. I am not denying that there are committed and hard-working students who have a different attitude towards university studies. However, it seems clear that ensuring sufficient enrollments poses a few problems, and I will discuss some of them.

During my career as an academic I have become familiar with different academic systems. I completed my first university degree in Italy, and subsequently moved to Britain to pursue my doctoral studies in Social Anthropology. After completion of my

PhD, I was elected into temporary teaching and research positions in England and Wales. I subsequently crossed the Atlantic and worked in universities in the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. I recently moved to Memorial University of Newfoundland, to which I am currently affiliated. Obviously different universities have different systems, yet while most value research, they also place increasing emphasis on "learning" and "student success". These are highlighted by their mission statements (which I quote anonymously): «to provide the environment and support to ensure (the students') success»; «to instil in (students) a lifelong quest for knowledge and understanding»; «to provide students with a transformative, academically rigorous personal learning experience»; and so forth. One way in which knowledge is instilled and a learning experience is provided is through "engagement". Engagement may take different forms, yet at the level of practice engaging students usually entails stimulating their interest in the subjects taught and establishing a relationship between such subjects and the "real world". Thus, more and more universities run seminars and symposia on how to make students more engaged. Engagement, in turn, has drawn the attention of the private sector too: I am often contacted by publishing companies encouraging me to adopt their newly-published textbook that has the potential to enhance students' engagement; likewise, computer companies occasionally ask me to recommend their products to the university's purchase department on the grounds that their adoption will foster students' engagement. Emphasis on engagement is hardly surprising: after all, if audit technologies (like course evaluations, for example) set out to improve the quality of teaching, improved teaching techniques will likely produce engaged and motivated students. But how "engaged" are students in the neoliberal academy?

One thing I have always found difficult to assess is students' engagement itself. Until quite recently I assumed that students' questions on the subjects examined in class and their participation in discussions were evidence of engagement. Moreover, because of its focus on the "real world", Anthropology can play a significant role in stimulating students' interest. In theory this is true. Yet in practice engagement becomes a problem if students need to work as a result of the high tuition fees that many universities charge. While a few years ago most students used to study and work, nowadays they work and study. Thus, a full-time job means a very limited amount of time to be devoted to study. This situation brings to mind what Gusterson (2011) wrote not long ago: because losing a job is not an option, students skip the readings for a class in order to be able to show up for work. There is little doubt that some students know how to balance work and study, and this skill is reflected in their final grades. However, these are a minority: most of those who have recently attended my classes, for instance, told me very honestly that succeeding in exams is a matter of luck. They always hope to be tested on their lecture notes only, and know that questions on the assigned readings are likely to result in mediocre or low marks. Yet getting not-so-good marks is preferable to being fired.

The stress and anxiety stemming from the attempt to balance work and study are revealed particularly by the e-mails some students send me the night before a test. Most of these ask on what materials they should focus, whether it is necessary to remember dates or definitions, and the like. Others ask whether the ethnographic video shown in class or the article on reserve in the library may be found online. There is nothing wrong with these questions. Yet they show that preparation for a test is usually left for the last minute, and that very little, if anything, of what has been learned is likely to be retained. In a recent class, I encouraged a student to contribute to discussions and summarize the points she had made in her presentation a few days before, and she replied that she could not even remember what the presentation was about. This is an extreme case, but it is an indicator of the "disengaging" effect of high tuition fees, and reveals that for an increasing number of students the main goal of studying is to pass a test.

Engagement becomes even more problematic at a time when an increasing number of students make use of mobile electronic devices with access to the Internet. Nobody can deny that these are very useful tools: after all, a visit to the university library involves time and money to be spent on photocopies, and a little device can save both. However, easy access to sources can have perverse effects like, for example, excessive dependency on electronic devices. Convincing students to visit the university library to find sources for a research paper has become a challenging task, given that retrieving academic articles from databases is deemed much easier and faster. This is not laziness, but pure economic calculation: the time spent in a library is time taken off work, and the more time, the longer it will take to pay off one's debts. Gone are the days when students used to come to my office to ask for advice as to what books they should read during the summer. Nowadays I am more likely to hear about the summer jobs for which they plan to apply. The "job", in turn, is no longer the means to pay off debts: it has become an end in itself.

As a result of these changes, campus is becoming less important as a context of socialization and exchange of ideas among students, and the increasing popularity of online courses may have "desocializing" effects. Shortly before the winter semester came to an end, I was asked by some students who took one of my courses for the notes of the lectures they had not been able to attend. I drew their attention to the course description, and reminded them that it is their responsibility to get such notes from other students. They, in turn, gave the same reply: that they do not know the other students. This reply reminded me of an important thing, namely, that one of our tasks, as anthropologists, is to make students familiar with cultures and societies (broadly defined). But how can students become "engaged" and learn about something called "society" if they cannot (or do not want to) relate to others attending the same small class? Welcome to the neoliberal university.

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