



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

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Introduction

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Introduction

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In the summer of 2016, Anuac hosted a forum dedicated to *Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy* (Heatherington, Zerilli 2016), featuring short papers by colleagues across Europe, North America, and beyond. Contributions witnessed unfolding transformations in their universities related to changing education policy frameworks, declines in funding, the introduction of audit cultures, and new forms of public-private partnership. As Sandra Grey has recently described the case of New Zealand universities subjected to rigorous managerial systems, «the picture is one of institutions and their academics being robbed of the space to be engaged in projects which are not countable, auditable, measurable or commercializable» (2017: 275). This suggests profound impacts on the mission of higher education and possibilities for critical research. Shore and Wright have explained, with particular reference to studies of institutions in Europe and New Zealand, «under pressure to produce “excellence”, quality research and innovative teaching, improve world rankings, forge business links and attract elite, fee-paying students, many universities struggle to maintain their traditional mandate to be “inclusive”, foster social cohesion, improve social mobility and challenge received wisdom – let alone improve the poor records of gender, diversity and equality» (2017: 1-2). These same pressures have been recognized by the American Association of University Professors, which recently marked serious threats to systems of shared governance, organized labour, principles of social diversity, and the fundamental role of colleges and universities in the U.S. (Barlow 2017).

Anthropologists continue to witness – as students, researchers, practitioners, teachers, community advocates and administrators – how the structural changes impacting higher education and research are affecting the future of our discipline, our institutions and our society writ large. Our second forum proceeds with this important work of participant observation in the

evolution of the neoliberal academy, from the perspective of diverse subject positions and national contexts. We are interested not only in the outcome of research and scholarship in the anthropology of higher education, but also in documenting the changing conditions of our everyday work in the academy, as well as the movements taking shape to resist and channel neoliberal initiatives that affect us. Snapshots of current academic contexts across the U.S. are provided by contributions from Virginia R. Dominguez, Sam Beck, Carl Maida, Alexis M. Jordan & Shaheen M. Christie, and Boone W. Shear. In addition, Martin A. Mills offers a perspective from Scotland, Berardino Palumbo discusses developments in Italy, Alan Smart provides insight from Canada, and Ger Duijzings reflects on an institution in Britain, while Alexander Koensler & Cristina Papa discuss comparative examples from Northern Ireland and Italy. Taken together, these grounded commentaries represent more than the sum of the parts. Like the essays contained in our 2016 forum, they are also evidence of the collective spirit of our discipline, which is fundamentally self-reflective and engaged. We are also pleased to reprint the 2016 Manifesto from the University of Aberdeen, *Reclaiming Our University*, which seeks out a new model for the public university in the twenty-first century.

Documenting the erosion of the tenure system in the U.S., Dominguez explores the pivotal principle of academic freedom. Although protected by European constitutional law (COE 2006), and written into the statutes of some state systems, the right to freedom of academic research and teaching is increasingly jeopardized by emerging procedures of administrative control and sanctions, as well as obligations and limitations associated with privately sponsored projects. Koensler & Papa (this forum) argue that the unspoken purpose of transformations in academic administration is the making of a new, docile subject: the “flexible academic person”. This recalls Jon Mitchell’s crucial point that «the transformation of subjectivity is not a “soft” project, but the hard edge of neoliberalism» (2016: 90). Yet academics are anything but docile, and diverse scholarly projects address challenges to the core values of the university. In the Auckland Declaration on the Purpose of the University in the 21st Century, for example, an international collaboration of students and academics from China, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, USA and European countries affirm the principle of higher education as a public good, and the necessity for institutions, researchers and educators to remain autonomous actors in order to fulfil mandates as «critic and conscience of society» (Newfield *et al.* 2016). Identifying a «new social contract for higher education», they insist,

Universities' responsibilities to societies must always take precedence over their accountability to their funders. Constraints and conditions on funding must not be used to compromise their educational autonomy, academic freedom, or social responsibility (*ivi*).

Drawing on experiences with educational theories and practices in U.S. public universities, both Beck and Maida stress the fundamental value of learning as an engaging engaged, transformative social practice in their contributions to this forum.

However, "learning away from neoliberalism", as Boone poetically suggests in his essay, is a route cobbled with paradoxes and contradictions. Neoliberal restructuring cannot be easily refused or reversed; neither should it be conceived as a monolithic, teleological process. In fact, Palumbo argues that despite evidence of the limits and damages produced by the recently established university audit system in Italy, it is better than relying on the "backward", "tribal" evaluation and recruitment practices that have previously held sway in Italian social anthropology. On the other hand, neoliberal processes do not necessarily transform all universities into institutions that operate according to the logic of profit seeking: as Smart contends in his commentary, the Canadian academy works rather as an economy of prestige that nonetheless serves the production of private profit, like the State itself. The contradictions and opacity of the university business model and discourse is also at the core of Mills' contribution, according to which: «the economic dynamics at work in these changes are far more unclear, and the rhetoric of neoliberalism and "business" hides considerable confusion, suggesting that it is something of a red herring» (Mills, this forum). And if the business model is far from being as efficient and worthwhile as it pretends to be, on the other hand «the movement for engagement is both part of this integration [into the market economy] and a movement of resistance against the neoliberal political economy» (Beck, this forum). Duijzings adopts a different kind of voice in his "ethnographic dispatches" that offer a perspective on the transformation process at a well-known institution in UK. His vivid account suggests that university teachers and professors, students, administrative staff and blue collar service personnel are all atomized categories of persons in the university who are rigidly classified, hierarchically organized, and most importantly kept separate one from the other, as though they were living in different, often conflicting professional worlds. It is this implicit social division that undermines their capacity to resist structural violence, whereas a coordinated coalition might assert an alternative to the prevailing university model.

This year's forum is concerned to explore how anthropologists are in fact actively re-envisioning and reshaping the institutions within which we work. As Shore and Wright (2017: 18-21) discuss, the corporate university is not the only model available to us; some academics are now participating in trust universities, cooperative universities and free universities. These authors conclude that such alternative projects of higher education may not be viable substitutes for the public university, «however they do illustrate the advantages of an educational system freed from commercial imperatives... [and they highlight] a commitment to, and confidence in, higher education as a vehicle for promoting a better future for all» (*ibidem*: 21). Such creative determination and collaboration is required to find new paths forward for public education. In this forum, we have sought out contributions that look toward a vision for reshaping the neoliberal academy in positive ways. While all of the essays here contribute understandings that support our scope for agency, a provocative contribution from Shear on the role of the “solidarity economy” movement on and off campus in Massachusetts is particularly apropos in this respect. Similarly, Jordan and Christie document the efforts of students, academic staff and faculty working together to advocate for academic freedom in Wisconsin. Each of these pieces supports the argument that only a genuine collaborative effort of students and teachers can help us move towards a new academic community envisioning the university «as a location of possibility from which to locate and advance lines of connection to egalitarian worlds» (Shear, this forum). This is perhaps best exemplified by the Reclaiming Our University movement originating at the University of Aberdeen, with its Manifesto providing an anchor to our forum:

We, scholars, students, staff and alumni of the University of Aberdeen, call for fundamental reform of the principles, ethos and organisation of our university, in order (1) that it should be restored to the community to which it belongs and (2) that it can fulfil its civic purpose in a manner appropriate to our times, in the defence of democracy, peaceful coexistence and human flourishing.

We invite our colleagues around the world to respond and contribute to this continuing exchange of ideas about the future of the academy. As Aaron Barlow avers, «We have work to do... We cannot allow decisions about our institutions to be made without our participation» (2017: 2).

Like the rest of this *Anuac* issue, our forum is dedicated to the memory of anthropologist Ugo Fabietti, whose progressive vision for the future of the discipline continues to provoke novel intellectual explorations.

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