

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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Introduction

Tracey HEATHERINGTON

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee

Filippo M. ZERILLI

University of Cagliari

The university, which has long remained one of the most conservative institutional models, has undergone dramatic transformations in recent years. This is true worldwide, notably due to reforms of the public sector that have intensified the commoditization of academic life, activities, roles and “products”. The modality and outcome of this process is not everywhere the same, as Sarah Green plainly puts it in her contribution to this Forum. In fact, this collection of short commentaries originated with the simple idea that while the neoliberalization of the university is a global trend that strongly impacts across different academic systems, it also has some specific, local features that influence the daily work and lives of students, researchers, teachers and administrators in particular ways. Even within a given national context shaped by the very same reforms and policies, we might observe specific articulations resulting from the various ways in which policy changes are introduced and managed, at times accommodated but sometimes resisted, subverted, or challenged by different subjects according to their visions of the university’s purpose and meaning in society as well as their own aspired roles. From this perspective, this Forum intends to explore how significant changes are actually occurring “on the ground”, as it were, by comparing the immediate experiences of colleagues working in a variety of academic roles and settings. Although some of the authors invited to participate in the Forum have produced significant expert contributions to the field of audit culture and education¹, our intention is not to collect new research *per se* but instead, to gather fresh thoughts and insights by reflecting on current events and personal observations related to the changing institutional contexts in which different anthropologists are embedded.

In this Forum we present contributions related to university settings in various countries, including Australia and New Zealand, Romania, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Mexico, US, Holland, Spain, Canada and the UK. While this selection of cases obviously cannot offer a geographically comprehensive picture of what is happening at global le-

1. This is an expanding field of research in anthropology, shaped by the influential essay of Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1999) and a seminal collection edited by Marilyn Strathern (2000).

vel, we seek to enlarge the sphere of critical and provocative conversations about emerging models of higher education across national contexts. In their introduction to a recent volume on neoliberalism in higher education, Boone Shear and Susan Brin Hyatt establish «the university as an important location of hegemonic struggle» (2015: 3), and explore how focused ethnographic research and analysis can help imagine more positive transformations going forward. We, too, aim to stimulate reflection on the changing role of the university today in concrete, empirical, ideally ethnographic terms. In assembling this set of commentaries, however, we asked our contributors for relatively informal, timely and accessible contributions that can make our perspectives and concerns from inside the academy easier to share with the general public. The immediate, thoughtful and even passionate responses we received within a very short timeframe have highlighted just how imperative a topic this is.

Our Forum opens up with a paper by Cris Shore and Sue Wright whose analysis frames and resonates with many other contributions here, and particularly with Jon Mitchell's account of the making of academic subjectivities. Drawing on years of systematic research within different university contexts, Shore and Wright make clear that the neoliberal model is not only transforming the role of the university in society, but also creating new kind of subjects whose practices and ethos are structured by an emerging entrepreneurial culture taking root at the heart of the academy. Dimtris Dalakoglou considers how neoliberal shifts promote entrepreneurial strategies and self-interested behaviour in academics. Exploring the etymology of idiocy, he insists it is crucial to recognize and challenge the actions of the many "idiots" now circulating in academia, that is, those simply acting according to selfish interests. Unfortunately, selfish or "idiotic" behaviour is often disguised and not always easy to identify as such, especially considering that the university is traditionally populated by "semi-scholars", as formulated by Arnold van Gennep in his inimitable, sardonic description of academic life (van Gennep 1911). Dalakoglou asks us to take sides, and reassert the moral ethos of common good.

In different ways, both Vintilă Mihăilescu for Romania and Jon Mitchell for UK suggest how difficult it is escaping from the audit regime and its trivial, apparently unquestionable truths. How could one argue against "teaching excellence" and "best practices", or to refuse to submit to "international standards"? However, as their contributions and others show, behind such apparently non-negotiable concepts and values, there exists considerable discretion. Paradoxically, assuming what is taken for granted and naturalized as signs of merit might ultimately produce nefarious social and political impacts to research and teaching, two essential activities of university professionals that are currently undergoing a process of unnecessary and unwanted separation. Yet Sarah Green reminds us that despite many haunting parallels and convergences across cases, we should remain attuned to the heterogeneity of neoliberal processes. Examining her experiences in the UK and Finland comparatively, she reflects that despite many negative impacts associated with new audit cultures, budget cuts, and moves toward privatiza-

tion in each case, there was no single, inevitable path toward a specific neoliberal model. Rather, there may be unexpected opportunities to shape the changing university in positive directions, particularly in national contexts where the public recognizes the value of higher education as a benefit to society.

The exploration of alternative moral frames for academic work running through these commentaries indeed suggests broad-based challenges to the ethos of neoliberalism. This gives some insight into emerging debates and conflicts around educational reform. Green's account of university downsizing in liberal Finland resonates with Tracey Heatherington's discussion of Wisconsin, but the latter emphasizes a clash in cultural values around education, and an evolving social mobilization to protect the core values of the university. Similarly, Gabriela Vargas-Cetina and Igor Ayora-Diaz consider the transformation of their own distinguished institution from a research-driven university into a "public service" university driven by market values. These deep changes to higher education are determined not only by the Mexican government, but also mandated by international agencies. They are taking place against an increasingly politicized backdrop of Oaxacan resistance to general educational reform. Where student mobilizations against educational reforms have taken place across Europe in response to austerity measures, these two cases illustrate the growing stakes for teachers and faculty.

The current transformation of the academic landscape, notably in UK and US, includes growing symbolic and financial privileges accorded to STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). As Shore and Wright, Heatherington, Narotzky, and Welch-Devine each show, this has serious consequences for what are sometimes perceived as less "relevant" or marginal disciplines in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In this regard, the recent diminishing number of faculty in social anthropology in Italy is also telling (Palumbo 2013). Noelle Molé Liston, Meredith Welch-Devine, and Tracey Heatherington all discuss the problem of growing precarity from different subject positions in the US context. While Molé Liston and Welch-Devine occupy untenured positions outside of anthropology departments, Heatherington has witnessed the loss of tenure guarantees as well as challenges to academic freedom within a state university system. Both Welch-Devine and Heatherington also play complex dual roles as research faculty and administrators advocating for graduate programs that must survive in the context of the audit regime. In fact, the significance of neoliberal shifts for students remains an important concern for many of us. Susana Narotzky, Meredith Welch-Devine and Jaro Stacul offer three different national perspectives upon the re-making of academic subjectivities among students, who often have no choice but to dedicate more attention to working off campus than to their studies. Here we see how the increasing precarity of faculty and staff is matched by increasing precarity and debt for students, affecting the quality of their training in our discipline and consequently, the discipline itself.

It is our hope that this Forum will establish a platform to host and discuss future contributions on this theme and above all, to move together toward a coalition in favour of the university as we think it should be. In this, we draw inspiration from the colleagues who established the Overpass Light Brigade in Milwaukee, Wisconsin². Since 2011, this alliance for creative activism has continued to champion public education and bring visibility to progressive causes, by lighting up signs above the highways and public spaces. Over the past five years they have forged a network that spans well beyond the state, and reminded us how powerful our words, ideas and collective actions can be. While current policy discourses may tend to reinforce the hegemony of neoliberalism, both Tim Ingold (2016) and Tracey Heatherington (this Forum) recognize expanding local movements to reclaim the model of the public university. If, as Thomas Docherty recently argued (2015: 1), «there is a war on the future of the university» worldwide, then it is essential that we become engaged, take sides, and decide actively what kind of university we do stand *for*.

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2. See <http://overpasslightbrigade.org>.