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Evaluating Academia.

Between Old Hierarchy and New Orthodoxy.

Barak Kalir et Pál Nyíri



There is a [growing body of literature and events](#) critiquing the spread of ‘audit cultures’¹ in Western research institutions. In brief, these audit cultures imply the assignment of numerical values to the ‘output’ of researchers, the ranking and/or financing of institutions, departments and/or individuals based on these values, and, perhaps most significantly, the dependence of the financing of new research on the forecast of research ‘output’ ahead of time—in essence asking that researchers predict the outcomes of research not yet undertaken. Although audit cultures are based on the ideology of transparency and accountability, their implementation is rarely accompanied by exercises in deliberative democracy; rather, ‘transparency’ concentrates on the production of information that conforms to particular language and

formats (Neyland 2007). Although in some instances they undermine entrenched inequalities of power within academia, audit cultures also often produce tighter top-down controls and new, steeper power hierarchies, rather than the level playing fields they promise.

The emergence of audit cultures fits into the longer-term process of bureaucratization and democratization of the management of science (and other forms of 'expertise'), which in turn is part and parcel of the expansion of public policy into the previously elite realm of intellectual activity in the name of public financial and ethical oversight and is partly due to the result of growing distrust in the positivist promises of science since the 1960s (see Latour 1987). But audit cultures seem to fit more specifically the neoliberal ideal of the autonomous, productive, improvable person who should be made responsible for his/her own upkeep, given the tools to achieve it, and then allowed to prove his/her worth.

In recent years many countries, notably in Europe and parts of Asia, have moved to roll back public expenditure for universities, and to demand that an increasing share of their budgets come from the private sector. In Europe and Australia, such painful monetary cuts, conducted under the guise of reorganizations and new techniques for improving efficiency, often resort to audit discourse in an attempt to avoid or defer tackling the fundamental conflict between the insistence on the 'research University' and the relentless expansion of higher education, driven largely by political agendas and misguided state financing models. Considering the obvious unsustainability of these models and the transparency of attempts to use audit cultures to justify cost-cutting exercises with purely financial rationales (Rutten 2010), we are puzzled by and interested in the little, and mostly unorganized, protest that is being mobilized by the academic staff in universities around the world. The fact that many academics resort to the 'weapons of the weak' (grumbling in the hallways or passive resistance to implementing new policies) when confronting such imposed changes on their working environment and the merits of higher education for society at large is all the more surprising given the protective tenure position which many of the staff enjoy. At the same time, we dispute the blanket view that equates audit cultures with privatization. America's private university system does not resort to the kind of audits preferred by European (de)regulators: a more pressing concern for American academics is the increasing casualization of employment, and at the moment, state universities seem to be moving, if anything, to more old-fashioned management (ckelty 2010) under the influence of the financial crisis (Yanow 2010, Hagman 2010). In China, the introduction of audit cultures has come with more rather than less state funding for elite universities. These have become much less dependent on corporate funds than they were in the 1990s and have allowed their faculty to stake out more independent positions in public debates. At the same time, Chinese versions of auditing sometimes combine the 'measurements' familiar in Europe with the existential threats of the Us tenure system (Chen 2010, Lin 2010).

We will not restate here the many fundamental implications of audit cultures for academia; rather, we refer the reader to Chris Lorenz's contribution (2010) and to Rosalind Gill's article in *Silence and Secrecy in the Research*

Process (2010, reviewed here in Chow et al. 2010). Instead, we want to point to some limitations of this discussion to date.

First, critiques of academic audit cultures tend to be either specific to particular national or institutional contexts, usually with activist aims, or else highly abstract, as if the processes in academia—Western academia, at least—were homogeneous and as if the term ‘neo-liberalism’ were sufficient to explain them. The highly divergent departure points of national academic structures, their differing economic and administrative logics, the varied forms of academic power, inertia, hierarchy, culture and structure that respond differently to similar pressures have largely evaded scrutiny, to the point that the erroneous identification of research assessment exercises with the United States—as a form of justification for introducing them elsewhere—is rarely challenged. One result of this lack of comparative perspective is a certain fatalism—mostly in Europe and Australia—that mistakes particular managerial fads for the single and inevitable path into the marketized future, whether welcomed or loathed. There is neither substantial discussion nor mobilization (Anderson 2008)—with the exception of France, where it is linked to the abolition of the special status of researchers in the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS) network. As signaled in the title of this traverse, we find it necessary to caution against both the conceptual simplification and the idealization of either the ‘good old days’ or the internationalized tomorrow.

Second, among our colleagues in the humanities and social research it is customary to blame natural scientists for the advent of such ‘measures of success’ as publication counts, citation indices, impact factors and collaborations, creating the illusion that audit cultures work very well for physicists or biologists. Yet while the measuring rods employed in audits may arouse less resistance among some natural scientists, the transformation of the intellectual enterprise and the intolerance of long-term uncertainty that audit cultures imply is even more portentous for the future of discoveries in the basic natural sciences.

Third, for all the talk about the globalization of education and all the gestures towards China and India transforming global academia as the increasingly dominant source of students and scholars, there has been little attempt to understand either how these changing demographics are affecting academia beyond its economics (for example, through the reconfiguration of institutional rankings and their criteria) or how the domestic research scene in India or China itself accommodates the ideology of audit.

Our traverse therefore offers a comparative perspective that has generally been left out of the discussion to date. The contributions we have solicited point to the similarities but also the differences in the meanings and structural implementation of audit cultures in the Us (Yanow 2010, Hagman 2010), Europe (Rutten 2010) and China (Chen 2010, Lin 2010). The common picture that emerges from these contributions, read against the rest of the traverse, is the discrepancy between the declared aims of audit cultures in their existing forms and the results they deliver.

Les articles du dossier.



[Audit Cultures in Academia.](#)

Matthew G. Hannah • janvier 2011

[Dear Editorial Board, I am glad to see you are considering this issue. It is crucial to the future of academic research. I include below a few basic thoughts about it. To set a context for these thoughts, I should mention that I am currently working on a larger research project with a colleague, ...](#)



[Audit, Anthropology, and the Way Forward.](#)

Johan Lindquist • janvier 2011

[As the theme of this *traverse* clearly states, during the last decade, in the wake of books such as Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins* \(1997\), there has been an increasing academic concern with *Audit Cultures* \(Marilyn Strathern, 2000\) or *Audit Society* \(Michael Power, 1997\). Particularly within ...](#)



[Quantified Control and the Mass Production of "Psychotic Citizens."](#)

Grahame Lock et Herminio Martins • janvier 2011

[In the bygone world \(a complex, messy, contradictory world\), different kinds of institutions embodied various, incommensurable kinds of value. Academic value was not to be identified with artistic value, nor artistic value with monetary value, and so on. But in our brave new world, it seems that a ...](#)



[Managing Science.](#)

Bert Klandermands • janvier 2011

[Quality Assessment. *Rector manificus*, ladies and gentlemen, the answer that is given increasingly within the science system reads, "Let us count." Let us count how many Euros have been acquired, how many publications are realized, and how many citations are generated. The higher the score, the ...](#)



[Evaluating Academia: Resource List.](#)

• juillet 2010

[Événements. « Curating the European Universities. European Exposition and Public Debate », 10 et 11 février 2011, Université Catholique de Louvain. Ce colloque est organisé par le *Laboratory for Education and Society* de l'Université catholique de Louvain, le *Laboratory for Educationnal ...*](#)



[Seeing like a State.](#)

Mario Rutten • juillet 2010

[It's been a long time since academic discussions about research and teaching were part of the board meetings of the department of Anthropology and Sociology of the University of Amsterdam. Most of our meetings today deal with administrative problems only. Sometimes these departmental meetings are ...](#)



[Towards an Ethics of Slowness in an Era of Academic Corporatism.](#)

Yiu Fai Chow, Jeroen de Kloet et Helen Hok-Sze Leung • juillet 2010

['Now, of course, we live in Thatcher's psyche if not her anus, in the world she made, of competition, consumerism, celebrity and guilt's bastard son, charity: bingeing and debt.' Hanif Kureishi \(2008: 271\) The](#)

[hidden injuries of the neo-liberal University. In a recently published piece titled ...](#)



[Audit Culture with Chinese Characteristics?](#)

Lin Yi • juillet 2010

[The idea of audit, originated from financial regulation, has been introduced into public sectors to rank and assess professional performance against bureaucratic benchmarks and economic targets in response to organizational failure either due to inefficacy \(low quality\) or scandals \(Power 2007: 3, ...](#)



[Higher Education Policies in the European Union, the 'Knowledge Economy' and Neo-Liberalism.](#)

Chris Lorenz • juillet 2010

[To all appearances higher education in both the Eu and the Us has turned into a more fashionable topic for politicians and journalists than it was ten years ago. Since rumour has it that in the 'age of globalisation' we are living in a 'knowledge society' and that our economies are ...](#)



[The Social Production of Hierarchy and What We Can Do about It.](#)

Xiang Biao • juillet 2010

[Institutionalized education in most part of the human society seems intrinsically hierarchical. One is supposed to progress from a 'lower' level of learning to the 'higher'; 'average' kids study in mediocre schools, and the 'outstanding' go to top colleges; and, finally, ...](#)



[« L'économie de la connaissance », le nouveau management public et les politiques de l'enseignement supérieur dans l'Union européenne.](#)

Chris Lorenz • juillet 2010

[Aux yeux des hommes politiques et des journalistes, l'enseignement supérieur, en Europe comme aux États-Unis, est, semble-t-il, un sujet beaucoup plus porteur qu'il ne l'était il y a dix ans. Puisque, selon les rumeurs, dans « notre ère globalisée », nous vivons dans une ...](#)



[China: The Rise and Fall of 'University Cities.'](#)

Chen Dongmei • juillet 2010

[In 1999, China's State Council issued a 'Decision Concerning the Deepening of Education Reform and the All-Out Promotion of Quality Education.' This document introduced the term 'education industry' \(教育产业\) along with two major policy changes: a dramatic expansion in university ...](#)



[Quality, not Quantity, in the US Academy.](#)

Dvora Yanow • juillet 2010

['The whole business of peer-reviewed journals has no effect on the external world and is just a Rube Goldberg machine designed to get people tenure.' James C. Scott \(2007: 385\) 'Accountability has turned to ... bean-counting.' Chester E. Finn, Jr., former Us Assistant Secretary of Education, ...](#)



[Monographs Adrift.](#)

Lorri Hagman • juillet 2010

[The situation. The cycle of knowledge production depends on a symbiotic relationship among academics, publishers, distributors, librarians, and users who build on and challenge present and past knowledge to forge new knowledge. As an editor who acquires scholarly book manuscripts in the Usa, I have ...](#)



[Les cultures de l'audit et l'université : entre ancienne hiérarchie et nouvelle orthodoxie.](#)

• octobre 2009

[L'équipe d'EspacesTemps.net entreprend actuellement une réflexion sur la réforme de l'éducation et les cultures de l'audit dans le domaine de la recherche et souhaite inviter vos contributions à ce débat. Celles et ceux qui ont pris part à la discussion lors du colloque de ...](#)



[Pour une vraie politique de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur.](#)

Corinne Delmas • octobre 2009

[À l'heure où les prises de position se multiplient contre les suppressions de postes à l'Université et l'actuelle contre-réforme de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, la lecture du dossier « Que faire pour l'Université ? » consacré par la revue *Mouvements* à la ...](#)

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Rosalind Gill, 'Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University' in Roisin Ryan Flood and Rosalind Gill (eds), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 228-244.

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Illustration: tristam sparks, "european union colours", 4.8.2005, [Flickr \(Creative Commons license\)](#).

Notes

¹ 'Audit culture' is a term made popular by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern to describe one aspect of 'new public management.' See

Strathern 2000 and also Shore and Wright 2000.

Barak Kalir

Barak Kalir is lecturer at the International School for Humanities and Social Science (ISHSS) at the University of Amsterdam. He studied anthropology, sociology and economics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His MA studies in anthropology were carried out at the University of Chile and the University of Amsterdam, from which he graduated with honour (*cum laude*). His PhD was obtained at the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research with a dissertation entitled *Christian Aliens in the Jewish State: Undocumented Migrants from Latin America Striving for Practical National Belonging in Israel*. The book explores the immigration, settlement and life-strategies of non-Jewish workers from Latin America in Israel. Since 2006 Barak Kalir works as a post-doctoral researcher, investigating the (il)legal immigration of Chinese workers to Israel.

Pál Nyíri

Professor of global history from an anthropological perspective at Amsterdam's Free University, Pál Nyíri has a PhD in history from Moscow. He pursued undergraduate studies of chemistry in Moscow, Budapest, and New Jersey, followed by graduate training in Asian studies in Oregon. He also had research fellowships in Oxford, Budapest, and Berlin, and has taught at Macquarie University in Sydney. His research area includes human mobility (particularly migration and tourism) and the cultural politics surrounding its management and containment, as well as China. His publications include *Seeing Culture Everywhere. From Genocide to Consumer Habits*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2009 (with Joana Breidenbach); *Scenic Spots. The Construction of the Chinese Tourist Site and the Question of Cultural Authority*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2007; *Transnational Chinese. Fujianese Migrants in Europe*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004 (with Frank N. Pieke, Mette Thunø, and Antonella Ceccagno); *China Inside Out. Contemporary Chinese Nationalism and Transnationalism*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2005 (ed. with Joana Breidenbach); and *Globalising Chinese Migration*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002 (ed. with Igor R. Saveliev). His blogs can be found at chinasaysno.wordpress.com and culturematters.wordpress.com.

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