I Wanted to Be an Academic, Not 'A Creative': Notes on Universities and the New Capitalism

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In 2002 I left the lectureship that I had thought would be my dream job. The university world was, I felt, changing into something I did not believe in and did not want to belong to. Since then I have discovered that two of my main complaints, audit and celebrity culture, are making work difficult far beyond academia. Yet there is an appetite – particularly among people with power and influence – for more of the same. One thing that makes the situation worse, but that is not much talked about, is the ongoing obsession with innovation and creativity.

Drawing eclectically from anthropology, urban studies and publicly available policy documents, and adding a liberal dose of subjective experience, this essay suggests that the debilitating aspects of audit and celebrity culture can only get worse if higher education lets itself be swallowed up by the twin-imperatives of the knowledge economy and creative cities.

'Waffle Generation' and Its Critics

After two years as a post-doc in the USA I knew that a full-time lectureship would be tough as well as rewarding, but it took only another four years before I left. I had reached a point where the idea that academia was being run like a "well functioning waffle generator" (my translation from the Finnish '*toimiva puppugeneraattori*') (Tienari, 2006: 14) felt depressingly apt.

These days I am not just used to hearing academics grumble, my own experience on a one-year Masters course at University College London proved that the costs of difficult working conditions cascade down to students. Apart from there being, literally, not enough space to accommodate our year, the low morale and motivation among staff taxed our student experience.

Eloquent and sustained critique notwithstanding,[1] universities are under constant pressure to become more entrepreneurial and more focussed on employability. There is talk of professors and lecture theatres, not to mention contact time, soon giving way to corporate universities and virtual institutions that offer 'webinars' instead of seminars. What happens in and to universities, for instance through the Bologna process,[2] is routinely legitimated in terms of economic policy and frequently discussed in the language of business strategy. The work of universities becomes incorporated into a standard narrative that highlights, not always appropriately or accurately (Deem, 2007), intensifying global competition and accelerating business change.

One thing that has changed is the social role of academics as professionals. This shift, however, goes well beyond universities since the very idea of professionals as trusted and valued, competent and automatically accountable to society, has come to feel outmoded. Instead, we have practices that "favor individualistic efforts, mutual rivalry, instrumental use of 'human resources', and performativity" (Räsänen, 2008: 14). The tyrant most frequently blamed for this misery is audit.

The Rhythm of Audit

"Auditors are, Euro-American scholars and academics would be the first to admit, … ourselves" (Strathern, 2000a: 315). However, audit can combine with learned habits of self-discipline and self-scrutiny to crippling effect (Strathern, 1997). If the improvements it seeks and recognises are not what academics would consider progress, audit does make it possible to justify demands to accommodate more students, produce more papers, attract more accolades, year after year after year. I never quite learned to handle the way the processes of audit sliced off a part of my work and my being, and eroded my sense of purpose.

I was settling down in the department, collaborating across the college and the country, and sustaining and developing international links. For a while the everyday pleasures of academic work – wonderful students, interesting colleagues, promising research projects – did offset the chronic lack of time. But would my efforts turn out to be valuable and could I ensure that they would be counted as such? Older colleagues said they were concerned, even depressed about the direction of change, but claimed they were powerless to resist. And there was no respite. As soon as the Research Assessment Exercise[3] (RAE) of 2001 was over, talk turned to the next RAE in 2008. Audit was moving the goal-posts, feeding a fear that my efforts would never be good enough.

I encountered resentment throughout the institution, even shame that it was not more prestigious. I did not share this feeling, since I appreciated the college's quirkiness and

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1   The literature is now voluminous. I draw largely on Strathern (1997, 2000a, 2000b); Shore and Wright (1999); Mäntylä et al. (2006); Deem (2007) and others cited in this text.

2   The European Union's creation of a European Higher Education Area by 2010.

3   The Research Assessment Exercise translates research activity into measures by which funding councils can then allocate resources.

even its insalubrious surroundings.[4] But I was frustrated by the fact that our institution, remarkable in so many ways, was routinely compared, both officially and unofficially, to those in the 'Russell Group', a self-selected and informal lobbying network, made up of the UK's top research universities. This probably also corroded our sense of collegiality and our inclination to take risks. Academics have always, I'm sure, been competitive, but my point is that formal external evaluation combined with informal value judgements made us prone to look over our shoulders and made it harder to know how to value our achievements and ourselves.

The resentment was amplified because the information we were creating, and which enabled authoritative comparisons to be made in the first place, took up so much time and energy. Whatever we did, there was almost always a sense that someone somewhere wanted to know we were doing it properly. And so for a time I kept a record of how I managed my time, and complied with requests for measurable information, about student attendance and satisfaction, for instance, or on the research activities I could squeeze in. As difficult as this was at an individual level, departmental discussion about how best to respond to novel management demands was even more infuriating, a waste, I thought, of everybody's time, yet unavoidable. The monotony and exhaustion of producing all this administrative information did not help.

Finally, the spectre of constant examination made it extremely hard to maintain a work-life balance. (In a metropolis like London this is an ever worsening geographical challenge, given the affordability problems relating to homes, childcare and the education system.) The first priority was to feed the administrative machine as well as the publication market. By and by this meant losing the rhythm of one's own life. This became starkly apparent to me when I first mentioned that I was getting married. One colleague was particularly surprised that there was to be a wedding. Who, after all, had time for weddings these days. As anthropologists, it seems, we could write about other people's life cycle rituals, but our own were subordinate to other apparently higher goals.

Yet if something was distorting the proper aims of my practice as an anthropologist, I don't think it was my private life.

Profession Meets Business

It is possible to argue that late twentieth century employment practices as a whole are unsustainable and unhealthy. Finnish historian Juha Siltala writes that we are witnessing "hyper-competition's experiment with the human body" (2004: 220). Others, notably feminists, have shown that capitalism's requirement for flexibility denies the limitations of the human body and of nature, and severely compromises the future (Soper, 2003; Brennan 2000). I have suggested before that academics could fight their corner better if they set their problems in this wider context (Berglund, 2005), and went beyond the

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4   Goldsmiths College is part of the University of London, but is located in South East London, on one of the main arterial roads into the capital.

experiences of academic life to consider the changing role of professional expertise in general.[5]

One profession that has reflected for some time on the changes in professional life is architecture (Saunders and Rowe, 1996; Foxell, 2003). Like academics, architects frequently lament their loss of authority, prestige, and, sometimes, financial reward. As in academia, periodic reports surface about the difficulty of recruiting and about the demoralising conditions of work. Like academics, architects are rarely happy about being asked to conduct themselves as entrepreneurs. Indeed, until only a few years ago, there was little expectation that they should.

When professionals – architects, medical doctors and doctors of philosophy – complain about their losses and about the need to sell themselves, one response is to wave them off as relics of the past, guarantors of a modernity that Foucauldian critique and geopolitics, not to mention technological change, has since relegated to history. A more sympathetic response is possible. Articulated in the literature I have referred to, it acknowledges the losses – of trust, judgement, self esteem and other benefits that are hard to measure. Usually it highlights the rise of managerialism, perhaps even the depredations of neoliberal capitalism, as the source of the problem.

All-purpose managerial expertise arose, broadly speaking, in the late twentieth century to serve the needs of firms operating globally. Although, as in universities, management has many of the functions of bureaucracy it now adopts the language and stance of business. One could say that management-speak provides the soundtrack for the culture of the new capitalism (the title of a book by Richard Sennett to which I return below). A provocative illustration from the corporate world is Corinne Maier's *Bonjour Paresse* (2004). Maier describes a world where there is much talk and much posturing, but little or no risk taking and precious little sense of responsibility. For her, and for the employees whose lives are hollowed out by the cynicism she describes, the language of business management is not so much a vehicle of communication as an endless source of humour. In fact, it is best enjoyed for its silliness, its up-beat but empty words: best value, win-win, fast-tracking, whatever is flavour of the month.

Yet the hold of business language and ideas is remarkable. The language of business can now be applied to all and any human endeavour, even though neither intellectual (Urwin, 2006) nor empirical grounds (Miller, 2003) for doing so appear to have been established.

Performing for the Audience

Though it might provoke a sad or critical reaction, it no longer surprises when universities are talked about as if they were businesses that 'perform' either well or not so well. We are used to them responding to stakeholder demands, undertaking analyses of strengths and weaknesses or being concerned to "improve the strategic value and

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5   In addition to the references already mentioned, see Cohen (1993) on academia; on the broader field see O'Neill (2002) and Foxell (2003), and in a journalistic register see Ehrenreich (2005).

leverage of their learning and development (L and D) investments" (Todd, 2007: 2). There might be something faintly amusing about how business language can be contorted to fit educational rather than commercial ends were it not for the pressure that this puts on everyone involved. It seems particularly sad for academics, many of whom find themselves adopting habits that conflict with the fundamental drivers of good scholarship. The successful and talented find themselves doing management tasks and sitting in meetings instead of undertaking research. Political imperatives and policy agendas make it difficult to get funding for critical or radical investigation unless one knows how to 'spin' a topic or 'play the system'. The business take-over means that academics are increasingly preoccupied by, and better at manipulating, appearance.

It is not just universities; in fact the UK's public sector as a whole suffers from this preoccupation. Fortunately the problem has not gone unremarked or unanalysed. Danny Miller takes an anthropological perspective on the debilitating impacts of business-based practices in the UK's local government. In an effort to salvage local democracy, central government has tried to enhance legitimacy and transparency by creating a constant inspection process, similar to that imposed on universities (Miller, 2003).

To improve performance, Britain's local authorities have been directed, for example, to remove jargon from their documentation. Miller argues that this has actually emptied it of all *useful* expert-based insight so that municipalities are now producing monotonous documents that state the patently obvious to the point of being "entirely performative, a kind of incantation" (*ibid*.: 63). Distressingly, an enormous amount of work is being done to achieve this pointlessness. Worse still, it delegitimises local government even more. More effort goes into ensuring that a local authority's services are represented correctly than goes into actually improving those services. The auditors' concerns are privileged and the professional judgement of the functionaries is deemed practically irrelevant. Miller reminds us, however, that these attempts were all well-intentioned, aiming to improve services as well as accountability. Instead, a considerable burden has been imposed on local government resulting in confusion and demoralisation.

As in the RAE, the inspectorate is a tool for measuring and judging, but it is also an instrument of punishment and reward. Money is not necessarily at issue, but "the best councils (municipalities) are promised a light auditing touch in the future, while failing councils are promised even heavier audits to come" (Miller, 2003: 66). In other words, those who do well will be rewarded by getting back some of the time they need to produce substance as opposed to image. Clearly, the information that audit creates does have consequences even though it is so shorn of local detail, so abstract, as to be misleading or meaningless – except, that is, by the aesthetic criteria of audit itself. Put another way, the data it produces is meaningful and useful to the experts in audit. The experts in the fields that the process is meant to assess, say anthropology, chemistry or ancient languages, have quite different interests.

Still, context-free information has its uses, particularly in a global market environment.[6] Reducing a place or an organisation – a university, say – with qualities and locational attributes to a series of standard indicators means that it is possible, from anywhere, to

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6   My thinking on this owes a lot to how I interpreted a talk by Georgina Born (2006).

see it in a particular way. It can be ranked according to its performance, easily and quickly, as in league tables of the world's top research institutions – or in any of the corporate, regional or other beauty contests that regularly make headlines these days.

By drawing attention to appearances like this, audit supports shallowness and enhances the power of image, even if the way it does so is mundane and technocratic. A similar narcissistic impulse is embodied in a more flamboyant way in star performances. And this brings me to celebrity culture, an affliction suffered by many universities, perhaps top universities in particular. I experienced this most clearly at American conferences, where some star speaker or fashionable panel always seemed to induce excitement and overcrowding. However, star academics are now enticed by universities around the world, and they have certainly become a feature of the British academic landscape (*The Guardian*, 2007). It seems likely that it was the RAE that brought the trend to the UK (*THES*, 2005). Now university reformers everywhere have one eye on attracting the best in the world. Universities-UK, the representative body for the executive heads of universities, has even published on the topic of "Talent wars: the international market for academic staff". Once again, academia is in good company. Stars have their place in all kinds of occupations today, not just the performing arts and sport. The 1990s produced 'starchitecture' and the 21st century has even inspired bars in the coolest US cities to ensure their attractiveness by employing 'startenders'. Not everyone can be a star, but the star system touches everyone, particularly in more fast-paced and cutting-edge fields, and generally in what are known as the creative industries and the knowledge economy.

Audit and celebrity culture both have the currently valued capacity to organise our attention. Both are derided, but they are clung to, even in universities, because the attention they organise is believed to have tangible consequences. After all, from the point of view of an institution, it makes sense to draw in star academics who attract students and, maybe, research funding. Under pressure to perform in one area, however, star academics may not be so easily persuaded to perform in other, more mundane, areas. Knowing their value as elite workers, they tend to be treated with care lest they be tempted to move on again.

Creative Cities

Having embraced business practices like audit, today's policy makers also appear to be in thrall to the idea that creativity and cognitive capital 'create wealth'. The creative class are the new elite, a designation conferred both in admiration (Florida, 2002; Castells and Himanen, 2001) and as critique (Berglund, 2007; Peck, 2007). Either way, governments at all levels favour this new elite. They reputedly work so hard (and play so hard) that they require around-the-clock consumption as well as specific investments in infrastructure, from communications technologies to trendy street life. For well over a decade now, municipalities of all sizes and kinds have been preening themselves to look cool, cutting-edge and where it's at, and subsidising the kinds of cultural facilities, business premises and lifestyle options that the creatives are assumed to prefer. As Jamie Peck puts it, the creativity fix has spread like wildfire, with urban leaders from mega-cities like London to the unlikeliest provincial centres bending over backwards to

accommodate the "needs of a techno-bohemian slice of the middle-class" (Peck, 2007: no page numbers).

The preferences of the creative class are arguably shaping not just geography but our psyches. Urban sociologist Richard Sennett has a distinguished record of charting the shifts from an industrial society to what he calls the culture of the new capitalism, which he describes and finds wanting in his book of that title (2006). Its dominant institutions – cutting edge firms – have established new ideals and norms that, Sennett maintains, are damaging to most of us. They erode the ability to build self-esteem at work and they produce deficits of loyalty and trust.

Whether one calls it new capitalism or the creative economy, Sennett's analysis captures something important beyond the exigencies of audit. He describes a world where frenetic technological change combines with short-termism giving rise to endemic time-anxiety and causing "people to skim rather than to dwell" (2006: 127). Shallowness is an apt adjective, ditto youthful and footloose. Ideal workers in the most highly valued sectors of the economy are young and willing to move, happy to live improvised lives as consumers and workers, even as political subjects. They are, above all, willing to flex. Such individuals are valued because employers no longer want skills learned over time or in-depth knowledge, what they are looking for is the ability to learn the new. Those most likely to succeed in the contemporary work place also, according to Sennett, have a very good ability to cope with failure. They just move on to the next thing and hope their work will bring rewards next time. Alas, I believe very few of us can, genuinely, achieve such nonchalance.

The critiques by Sennett, Peck and others resonated with my own experiences of academia. But what do they have to do with the future of universities? Very much, I would say. After all, most academic staff are typical – or at least potential – representatives of the creative class that sustains the new capitalism. More fundamentally, many universities and even departments have latched onto the rhetoric of the knowledge economy. Having made this choice, they participate in a hype that may be as debilitating as it is unjustified. There is a danger that their future will become hostage to an ultimately unrealistic as well as intellectually and culturally impoverished set of political strategies.

Higher education is being reshaped along the lines of business management because it is supposed that this way they can better contribute to the idealised new, creative capitalism. There are several problems. First, people are not, cannot be, ideal creatives in a permanent state of tense readiness, all the time. Second, universities do not on the whole behave like firms competing for business and nor, despite common rhetoric, do cities (Urwin, 2006). Compared with efforts to nurture their own assets, the strategies adopted by cities and towns to attract skilled labour or investment are insignificant (2006: 6). The same is surely true of universities. They do not rise or fall on the basis of how much money and talent they have managed to bring in, but on how they perform.

Performing Well

I have described the huge pressures to behave, all the time, as if one were performing for an audience. It's a grim kind of performance, being judged by auditors and learning to negotiate a personal and professional relationship to global superstars. It generates an unhappy fatigue, a sense that energy has gone into creating image rather than substance, cool and cutting-edge shallowness labelled 'creativity' instead of fundamentally satisfying in-depth investigation with all the skill and inventiveness that academics know this requires.

But performance does have a more positive connotation also, and that is the sense of achievement, accomplishment, doing a task well to standards one sets oneself on the basis of experience and mutually shared understanding of excellence. These things still have a place in universities, although to experience a good performance in this second sense, increasingly it seems, the place to go is the theatre or a concert or some other performing arts venue.

The occasional prima-donna antics notwithstanding, academics are not and never should become performing artists. Many have, however, been taken in by a hyped up, business-based concept of creativity, and by a dubious economic argument that claims universities have no alternative but to become businesses. If academics want to recapture the universities for reasoned and imaginative deliberation and for inspiring education there must be more honesty about what such a business-oriented knowledge economy entails and more clarity about what a creative city creates.

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