Compliance and Resistance Within Neoliberal Academia

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Setting the Scene: Research and Writing Against the Neoliberal Grain

Susan Gair, Tamar Hager, and Omri Herzog

Abstract This chapter outlines our collaborative research and writing project which recounts personal stories regarding everyday survival in the neoliberal academia. It begins by depicting the characteristics of academic neoliberal regime, such as authoritarian managerialism, accountability processes, standardization measures, performance indicators and benchmarking achievement audits. As previous research shows, neoliberalism impacts the everyday lives and wellbeing of academics, prompting us to take a deeper exploration of academic selves. The chapter then goes on to describe our methodology, collaborative autoethnography, introducing the advantages and disadvantages of personal stories as a research method. It ends by outlining our working method, exploring how we collectively wrote, shared, discussed and reflected on our texts.

Keywords Neoliberal academia • Audit culture • Academic selves • Performance • Collaborative autoethnography

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Susan appeared on screen sitting at a desk covered with papers and books. It was 6 PM in Townsville, Australia. She apologized for not being able to stay for long because her grandchildren were coming over. In Tel Aviv, Israel, Tamar, who first appeared against the background of her study at 11 AM, was constantly changing rooms and corners in her flat, apologizing for the unstable Wi-Fi connection. Omri's face looked hazy in the light from the window of his rented flat in London. Originally from Sapir College, Israel, Omri had tackled COVID-19 while on a sabbatical in the UK. He was apologizing for his drowsiness at 9 AM caused by working late into the night.

Work meetings via computer screen have become common during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital images have replaced human contact. Yet for us it has been a routine for the last two years. In fact, the decision to write about life in neoliberal higher education had been dominated by Zoom from the end of 2018. During the two years of our collaboration we have met virtually quite frequently to refine our ideas, plan our writing retreat in London, consider and then reconsider the book structure and discuss the division of our work. We shared ideas in exciting conversations full of disputes and divergent thinking. Zoom and emails served as a shared space for continuous discussions, for writing in real time, for sharing relevant texts and for exchanging international, local and personal stories as our collegial relationship deepened—the climate crisis, the pandemic, the fierce bushfires in Australia, the outbursts of violence in Israel, individual academic accomplishments, failures and tensions, family dramas and holiday plans.

Other transnational research and writing gatherings have been conducted in a similar way, mixing the professional and the personal. Before the pandemic, when budgets could be allocated and flights were still an option, international research projects like ours allowed physical face-to-face meetings somewhere on the globe. Our book was at first quite a common pre-pandemic academic venture. We met frequently online, we had one encounter "in person," face to face, away from our respective countries and we mostly wrote separately at our desks in Townsville, Tel Aviv and London. Yet our research has its singularity and uniqueness. Rather than describing, analysing and theorizing common neoliberal institutional processes, we chose to write personal stories in which we have explored and reflected on their damaging effects on our everyday lives as academics.

While negotiating disciplinary and national differences, we were enthusiastic to discover that despite strong similarities in our stories, each of us had interesting unique experiences to tell. At first the notion of a collection of articles seemed most appealing. An edited collection is easier to produce and edit and everything is faster; it is a better method in the

"publish or perish" regime. But we wanted a different book, one that goes against the grain and introduces deep co-thinking, collaboration and dialogue among scholars into the academic context. We wanted to question the way academic knowledge is created and represented through theories and generalizations. We aspired to challenge the standardization of academic writing forms. And we wanted to defy feelings of isolation and competitiveness which are integral parts of our everyday academic lives.

Our autoethnographic stories illuminate the emotional, psychological and mental costs of engaging in a highly stressful working environment. They primarily are divided across three chapters, each dealing with a different academic task. The first addresses the construction and management of an institutionalized "proper" academic CV; the second raises issues concerning the complexities of publishing within the framework of the constant neoliberal demand of "productivity" and the third tackles the challenges of teaching diverse classrooms of students/clients. Our stories demonstrate the impact of the contemporary neoliberal academic regime on our own emotional wellbeing, and on our relationships with research partners, students, colleagues, management and people in our personal circles. The critique of the neoliberal academy is thus a woven thread throughout the book, and it is personalized, hesitant and cautious.

Personal stories have been used as a research methodology during the last few decades by researchers who have believed that other research methods are futile, insufficient or inadequate for exploring certain social and cultural phenomena (Hager, 2019). Evading disciplinary jargon and professional language, personal stories provide immediacy—an artfully strategic elicitation of insights, feelings and experiences which allow deep immersion in the world portrayed—a sense of verisimilitude, and an encounter with dynamic, messy and chaotic reality (Banks, 2008; Brewer, 2010; Diversi, 1998; Frank, 2000; Rinehart, 1998).

In the neoliberal audit culture, where everything is measured and numbered, such a research method is uncommon and exists only on the margins of the social sciences and the humanities. Diminishing the significance of analytical generalizations, it emphasizes narrativized and particularized data usually regarded as superfluous by most academic discursive practices.

However, grounded in feminist epistemology, our research is based on the notion that the personal is political, and thus our individual detailed experiences illuminate recurring mechanisms of oppression and coercion in the academic maze. Determined to write our autoethnographies in dialogue, we present our collaborative writing as an alternative to the increasingly individualistic and competitive ethos of academic culture which

tends to dismiss the fact that all knowledge is constructed by intellectual exchange and cooperation. Therefore, our project could serve as a challenge and alternative to current academia.

From Universitas to Neoliberal Academia

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an extensive worldwide closedown of academic campuses, sending faculty and students to work online at their homes. However, as lecturers we were aware of previous attempts at diffusing digital tools into higher education, introducing them as being more efficient and cheaper than face-to-face seminars and lectures. The pandemic ironically has provided a magnificent opportunity and an immediate laboratory to examine this familiar capitalist vision.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2020) expressed his concerns regarding the extensive use of online teaching in a post he submitted during the global lockdown. He referred to the disappearance of the teachers' and students' physical presence as their being "permanently imprisoned in a spectral screen." He emphasizes how virtual teaching has killed group discussions, the liveliest part of instruction.

However, he was particularly bothered by:

> […] the end of being a student [*studentato*, studenthood] as a form of life. Universities were born in Europe from student associations—*universitates*—and they owe their name to them. To be a student entailed first of all a form of life in which studying and listening to lectures were certainly decisive features, but no less important were encounters and constant exchanges with other *scholarii*. […] This form of life evolved in various ways over the centuries, but, from the *clerici vagantes* of the Middle Ages to the student movements of the twentieth century, the social dimension of the phenomenon remained constant.

Agamben evokes one of the oldest models of a "Western university" initiated in Bologna during the twelfth century. Students who came from all over Europe to study in the city and hence were deprived of citizens' rights decided to protect their common interests by organizing themselves (Moore, 2019). Employing the commonest term for corporation (a guild, a trade, a brotherhood etc.), and community being in use at the time, they called themselves "universitas scholarium," the university of students in Bologna (Verger, 2003). When such student associations became powerful, and gradually spread to other parts of Europe, they could control

learning establishments (i.e. Bologna, Padua), appointing the professors, hiring their services for a year, supervising their teaching and fining them when they failed to fulfil their duties (Verger, 2003). Students could also threaten the municipal and clerical local authorities saying that if their rights were not acknowledged they would move away, taking the prosperity and wealth they had brought to the city elsewhere. The power of students' *universitas* was better exemplified by the decision of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1155 to grant the students and faculty of Bologna immunity from civil law, thus initiating what has later been known as academic freedom, much eroded lately in the current neoliberal academia.

However, in focusing on his concern for the evaporation of students to within the digital space, Agamben disregards another mediaeval model—the University of the Masters (universitas magistrorumet). At the University of Paris, teachers were those who lacked citizenship and needed to protect their interests, and thus created an organized community (Moore, 2019). At such a university, like Paris and Oxford, the teachers were full-fledged members of the institutions, gradually becoming a status group which transcended local and disciplinary boundaries. Possessing a distinctive corpus of knowledge, they enjoyed a high degree of cultural and social prestige which is still recognized today mainly when referring to "academic celebrities" (Verger, 2003). By pushing the scholar-teachers away from the campuses, compelling them to use digital technologies to converse with screen-images of their students and colleagues, COVID-19 has in fact threatened to terminate not only the survival of the universitas scholarium, the university of students, but also the universitas magistrorumet—the community of the masters.

Moreover, these institutional processes also defy the vision of the modern university represented by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the nineteenth century. In a memo published by Humboldt in 1810, prior to the building of the University of Berlin, he argued that the university should produce new, rationally scrutinized knowledge as well as cultivating students to become responsible free thinkers and researchers. "Attending lectures is only secondary," he demonstrated. "What is essential is that for a series of years one lives in close connection with like-minded people of the same age, who are aware that in this same place there are many thoroughly learned people, dedicated solely to the elevation and diffusion of science" (quoted in Ruegg, 2004, p. 21).

Another concept of academia that could be relevant here is the welfare university that flourished following the Second World War, mainly in the

1960s. During that time, universities opened their gates to diverse population in the United States and Europe, challenging institutional meritocracy, providing scholarship and stipends to all people who wanted to study, and job opportunities, good salaries and research funds to faculty even for those engaged in the humanities (Williams, 2006; Moore, 2019). Although the postwar university represented the democratic vision of equal opportunity, it was also built on the spectre of perpetual struggle. Students' movements which flourished all over the globe were the principal medium for successive transformations, such as the civil rights movement, 1960s–1970s student power and grassroots democracy, 1970s feminism and more (Marginson, 2011). Despite differences within local contexts, these movements shared a persistent call for equality and freedom to all people, irrespective of political, religious, socioeconomic and cultural background, and occasionally cooperated with interested faculty who held anti-war, anti-racist ideologies (Moore, 2019; Marginson, 2011). Academic institutions during these decades were diverse and bustling with intellectual interactions as well as activism—demonstrations, sit-ins and other types of provocations, actions and events.

These three concepts of the university demonstrate that these institutions serve several roles: an educator, a producer of knowledge and a social institution. Philomena Essed (1999, p. 212) describes higher education institutions as "functional structures and social relations between students, academic staff and administration the nature of which is informally determined by cultural politics privileging some groups and excluding others." Campuses have been perceived as social spaces, as microcosmos of society at large, where people from different classes, ethnicities, nationalities, sexual preferences physically meet. A common vision has been held by academics who are engaged in diversity work, like Essed and Sara Ahmed (2012). Such academics are familiar with the complexity of institutional hidden curriculum, that is the transmission of norms, values and beliefs in the institutional social environment and the opportunities of changing oppressive social structure it potentially entails. This mandatory institutional space which encourages the essential intellectual and social interactions began to evaporate as use of technologies infused academic life and accelerated when campuses were closed down during COVID-19.

However, it would be wrong to assume that these perturbing processes are new ones. Our academic experience reveals that teachers and students, as they were defined by the old universities and by Humboldt's more modern vision, started vanishing several decades ago, not by a pandemic

but rather by neoliberal ideology and practices. The logic of the capitalist market has turned the universities from quasi-independent communities of scholars engaged in free thinking in a fertile supportive institutional climate, into an educational market economy where teachers are service providers, students are customers and the administration dictate the institutional rules and actions.

This is the academia that the three of us have experienced for many years, where we teach, research and have been engaged in administrative and community work. This is the academia we are exploring via our personal stories written about and within the neoliberal maze. To fully appraise our accounts some explanation and clarification regarding the neoliberal institutional context is needed.

Negotiating the Neoliberal Culture

Neoliberalism is grounded in logics of globalization, marketization, privatization and individualization. It has penetrated most areas of public life as well as public institutions, changing their culture and functioning with increasingly disastrous effects. Jane Goodall (2019) defines neoliberalism as a set of political beliefs, values and practices informing heightened regulation, accountability, competition and justification of public expenditure. Early proponents of neoliberal ideology were optimistic and promoted its potential to bring freedom from poverty and inequality through universal involvement in the market economy. Yet it assured only the "survival of the fittest," turning out to be predominantly about corporate control and competitive self-interest (Goodall, 2019, p. 58).

Neoliberalism infiltrated higher education from the 1980s in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada and increasingly in other parts of the world, through authoritarian managerialism, "accountability processes, standardization measures, performance indicators, [and] benchmarking achievement audits" (Brule, 2004, p. 247). Rising targets on research grants and annual publication outputs have been common examples of eagerly collected metrics in such a regime. Norms and values of education as a public good of the previous decades have been gradually abandoned, while knowledge has become a product like any other (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Naidoo & Williams, 2015).

Jarvis demonstrates that so-called quality has "become an increasingly dominant regulatory tool in the management of higher education sectors around the world," imposing "quasi-market, competitive based