The making of a neoliberal academic

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Over the past 20 years, I have been re-formed and re-made as a neoliberal academic subject. I think of my previous subjectivity as something like a welfare academic. In the process of reform I have been made productive, responsible and enterprising. As Caroline Hatcher aptly puts it, these neoliberal qualities are 'both a leverage for change as well as a closure on what it is possible to become' (Hatcher, 1998: 382). More generally, this is the move, as Stefan Collini refers to it in his essay review of the 2011 Higher Education White Paper, '[f]rom Robbins to McKinsey' (Collini 2011: 9). Fred Inglis (2011) portrays this re-making in more dramatic and emotive terms:

> I suggest that our epoch is tearing itself away from the narratives that have bestowed meaning and continuity upon the northern hemisphere since 1945, and lost reason in 1989 at the end of the Cold War. What is dying is plain enough; but what rough beast, its hour come at last, slouches towards us to be born remains unimaginable.

One key goal of this rough neoliberal beast is 'the re-invention of professionals themselves as units of resource whose performance and productivity must constantly be audited so that it can be enhanced' (Shore & Wright 1999: 559). We have to be made to count and there is a proliferation of new spaces of calculation and new visibilities within which we relate to one another, and seek our place and our worth and our needs. Our days are numbered – literally.

All of this brings about a profound shift in our relationships, to ourselves, our practice, and the possibilities of being an academic. In other words, 'One sort of romance about being an academic is no longer speakable, thinkable, do-able in universities at the turn of the millennium' (McWilliam, 1999: 69) and is replaced by 'a new romance in which the enterprising academic is the central figure'. We are empowered to make ourselves into different or 'new' academics and we do much of this making to ourselves and to each other.

A key facet of the above is what I have called previously (Ball 2001, 2003) – with a little help from Lyotard and Foucault – performativity, a powerful and insidious policy technology that is now at work at all levels and in all kinds of education and public service, a technology that links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output. Within the rigours and disciplines of performativity we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it. There are new sets of skills to be acquired here: skills of presentation and of inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves. We become transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves – 'I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself' (Butler 2004: 15).

In regimes of performativity, experience is nothing, productivity is everything. Last year's efforts are a benchmark for improvement – more publications, more research grants, more students.

We must keep up; meet the new and ever more diverse targets that we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive, delivering up a 'targeted self' (O'Flynn & Petersen 2007: 469) or the 'shape-shifting portfolio person' (Gee 1999). Within all of this, more and more of scholarly disposition is rendered explicit and auditable. As I write this, I am contemplating an email about TOAST 2011–12 a new survey instrument of academic staff time. It says:

> 'You will be required to participate in 3 surveys, out of a total of 12 surveys in the academic year 2011–12. Each survey will be a one week survey, made up of all 7 days in the week, and all 24 hours in the day, in which you can fill in data. The weeks could be during term-time or out of term-time.

> 'During your survey week, you will be able to complete data on the activities you have performed on behalf of the Institute during that week, according to four main categories: Teaching, Research, Other Activities and Support Activities, each with further sub-categories. There will be guidance notes, descriptions and examples within the TOAST tool to help you decide which activities and sub-activities to choose. A copy of these notes is attached to this email. I would be grateful if you could study these now and familiarise yourself with the activities that pertain to you and do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or need any clarification.'

We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and to report on our performance and activities, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible. Performativity is a moral system that subverts and reorients us to its ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and for the performance of others. We take responsibility for

working hard, faster and better as part of our sense of personal worth and assess the worth of others in these terms. These techniques of regulation and self-regulation are creating a new episteme of public service through a 'reshaping of "deep" social relations' (Leys 2001: 2) which involve the subordination of moral obligations to economic ones (Walzer 1984) so that 'everything is simply a sum of value realised or hoped for' (Slater & Tonkiss 2001). Productive individuals, new kinds of subjects, are the central resource in a reformed, entrepreneurial public sector. Others are valued in terms of their performative worth and those who 'under-perform' are subject to moral opprobrium,. Systems designed to 'support' or encourage those who are unable to 'keep up' continuously teeter on the brink of moral regulation.

As a consequence of continual animation and calculation, there is for many in higher education a growing sense of ontological insecurity; both a loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do. Are we doing things for the 'right' reasons? – and how can we know! Unless they count! The first-order effect of performativity is to reorient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate measurable performative value. Teachers' judgments about class- or lecture-room processes may thus be subverted and superseded by the demands of measurement, or at the very least a new set of dilemmas is produced which sets the tyranny of metrics over and against professional judgment. The second-order effect of performativity is in the possibilities it creates to replace commitment with contract. That is to say, to the extent that higher education practices – teaching, writing and research – can be rendered into calculabilities, they can also be rewritten as contracts of performance, that can then be put out to

tender at some point, as has happened in other areas of public service.

If there are things that are worth defending within the previous regime of public service, and clearly not everything is, then one component of such a defence must be a proper understanding of the relations of power within which we now find ourselves enmeshed and which shape our present. Such an understanding involves coming to grips with the way in which the mundane techniques and tactics of attrition and change are joined up in an 'ascending' configuration of power and in an identity of relation between the elements as indicated above. However, we also have to appreciate the inconsistencies and ambiguities within the social fields and discourses which enact this identity in practice. While we need to understand how these elements and their relations enter into us and encourage us to work on ourselves in a variety of ways, we also need to hold on firmly to a sense that we are none of the things we now do, think or desire. ■

May 2021 Postscript

Just when you thought things could not get any worse…

Reading again the short article I wrote in 2012 for RiSTE (as it was originally called), having been asked for an update, the thing that strikes me most forcibly is that no update is necessary. All aspects of the re-making of the academic subject I described are still in play, just more so.

The move to online and remote teaching and learning offers a whole plethora of new possibilities for monitoring and measurement – more of what we do can be captured as data (Grimaldi & Ball, 2020). Every keystroke, every mark, comment, interaction can be recorded, timed and stored away. Almost every facet of the 'new HE' is now subject to what David Beer (Beer, 2019) calls the Data Gaze. Our social relations are interpolated as 'data relations', we see ourselves and others through the medium of data – data are what we are, and are our worth. We can be summed up – literally – and constantly held to account - literally. We are ordered by and within data and its insensitivities, subject to data-led thinking and governance.

So what is it that we have become? Some of us have become redundant, surplus to requirements, replaceable. Some of us have become expert, acquiring the new skills of data engineering and data analysis. Some of us have become anachronisms, out of date, irrelevant. What space is there to be otherwise? Escape from the gaze is not easy, particularly because it is not just out there looking in but it has entered our souls, we see ourselves and work on our selves in its terms. To be otherwise we must think ourselves, our relation to ourselves and to others, in other ways. That requires work of a different kind, it requires experimentation - constant effort to expand the scope of new modes of subjectivity - it involves the inevitability of failure - a process of creative self-fashioning, the opening up of vulnerability, unruly curiosity, and frank speaking (Ball, 2019). That is, 'The critique of what we are and experiments with the possibility of going beyond' (Foucault in Rabinow 1987 p. 108). ■

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