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Survival and subversion in the neoliberal university

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Abstract

Response to the Participatory Geographies Research Group's 'Communifesto for Fuller Geographies: Towards Mutual Security', September 2012

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‘Survival and subversion in the neoliberal university’
Responses to the Participatory Geographies Research Group’s ‘Communifesto for Fuller Geographies: Towards Mutual Security’, September 2012

<http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/10/15/symposium-on-the-participatory-geographies-research-groups-communifesto-for-fuller-geographies-towards-mutual-security/>

The ‘communifesto’ prepared by the Participatory Geographies Research Group (PyGyRg) offers a timely provocation for geographers to think about our roles and responsibilities as academics, and the types of universities that we wish to inhabit. It provides a platform for discussion and reflection about the more unfriendly, individualistic and expedient aspects of academic life; and proposes a range of interventions. The PyGyRg’s strategies ‘for fuller geographies’ urge us to consider how we can change our actions, collaboratively, to create working environments that enable diverse academic subjectivities to flourish. At a time when the neoliberalisation of our sector is becoming increasingly tangible (for instance, through REF cycles in the UK and ERA metrics in Australia), these are important issues for all geographers (and indeed, all academics) - not just those who regularly identify with participatory research agendas.

The neoliberal shift in western universities has long attracted the attention (and ire) of academic geographers. Key characteristics of this shift have included: decreased State funding for universities and concomitant declines in tenured/continuing faculty appointments; the increased casualisation of academic workforces; the emergence of an audit culture and increased managerial surveillance; the prioritisation of research income and productivity over teaching; and a growth in competitive individualism at the expense of collegiality, collaboration, altruism and activism (Castree, 2000, 2006; Crang, 2003, 2007; Dowling, 2008; Gibson, 2007; McDowell, 2004).

Academic individualism is precisely what Mrs Kinpaiby (2008) challenged with her rallying call to build the 'communiversity'. But the precariousness of academic employment means that many of us have adopted a survival mentality akin to the familiar air safety instruction: 'put on your own oxygen mask before helping others'. Especially during the early career stage, our focus is often on producing those outputs that are deemed most 'worthy' in the unrelenting calculus of the neoliberal audit culture: peer-reviewed journal articles (only in the most prestigious journals, of course) and government-funded research income. As much as this grates against many geographers' personal politics, we are constantly prodded to play by the rules of this neoliberal game to ensure the viability of our schools, and our own ongoing job security.

In our recent commentary, *'Career progress relative to opportunity: how many papers is a baby 'worth'?* (Klocker and Drozdowski 2012), we took issue with the neoliberalisation of academic labour from our position as early career academics with children. But academics with parenting responsibilities, and those who strive for more collaborative and community-engaged research agendas, have much in common. Children and participatory research are both immeasurably rewarding, but they are also innately time-consuming. They both impact on the overall quantum of time that can be spent producing the things that add most 'value' to academic CVs; and thus represent a deviation from traditional masculinised career trajectories (Berg, 2002). This comes at a cost. In both instances, female academics have borne the bulk of the disadvantage.

Understanding these costs has necessitated tough decisions for both of us. Natascha's PhD adopted a participatory action research (PAR) framework. Despite an ongoing political commitment to PAR, she has put it aside during the early stages of her career, focusing instead on less time-consuming approaches. This is an intentional (and admittedly expedient) strategy to maximise academic outputs (i.e. journal articles) in the quest for job security. Natascha is clearly

thinking first and foremost about her own oxygen mask. The pressure to compete has triumphed over her PAR principles, for now. Meanwhile, academic job (in)security is something Danielle has been reflecting on since the birth of her second child. Despite having secure (continuing/tenured) employment, and being fortunate to have paid parental leave, there has been a persistent necessity to keep the ball rolling while on leave – like many academics before her. Danielle acknowledges that some work is acceptable and unavoidable, and some opportunities are too good to miss (like the invitation to write this piece), yet to those outside of academia the premise of working while on parental leave is rather surprising. The cycle and expectation of (over)work are vicious. By working while on leave, Danielle has become complicit in perpetuating unhealthy work practices and the prospect of work for others. Perhaps even more apparent is the guilt of not spending ‘enough’ time with her children.

These experiences have got us thinking. Could the academy be more open to diverse career trajectories? Is it possible to circumvent these tough choices? How might we begin to actualise less individualistic academic subjectivities? Can we subvert traditional expectations of academic merit?

While we agree with the PyGyRg that our struggles should not be constrained by ‘the very ethos we seek to resist and change’, we all know that the audit culture is an obdurate feature of contemporary academic life. As much as we can (and should) continue to rail against the neoliberalisation of our academic labour, we also need other strategies in our toolkit. When we asked how many papers a baby was ‘worth’, we were trying to fold the logic of neoliberalism back upon itself to make diverse career trajectories ‘count’. While asking academics to quantify the impact of parenting on their careers caused some consternation, it forced us, and our participants, to consider what we want to see being valued and how. We proposed that ‘career interruptions’

(including, but not limited to, childbearing) should be factored into performance metrics in a routine and transparent manner, as a strategy for levelling the playing field and promoting greater equity in the academy. We acknowledge that quantifying career interruptions, whatever they may be, can and will make us (and others) uncomfortable, but it could also open a politically productive space within our neoliberal environment from which we can scaffold change (Larner 2003).

As the PyGyRg's communifesto points out, alternative ways of valuing academic labour are needed in other circumstances too. Imagine, for instance, if a quality report written for community stakeholders held just as much value in an REF/ERA cycle as a journal article. Or, if the time taken to build the trusting community relationships that are so essential to PAR could be factored into expectations about the rate of publication outputs. Imagine working in a university that recognises that meaningful research careers come in a range of shapes and sizes. But in order for diverse career trajectories and ambitions (of all sorts) to take shape, we need to keep pushing for more progressive understandings of impact and merit. Such 'in-here' activism is about changing the academic cultures and contexts within which we work (Castree 2000: 969). It is not self-indulgent, and not about having a 'whinge', but a crucial first step in making it possible (and even desirable) for academics to have fulfilling lives inside and outside the academy, and to engage in diverse forms of caring, support and activism.

What is needed now, then, are concrete examples of what these alternative research productivity metrics and understandings of merit might look like, and institutional commitments to making them happen. While these are absent, academics will have to continue to make tough decisions about whether to play the academic game by its (one-size-fits-all) rules, or bear the career consequences of deviating from the orthodoxy. For our part, we would like to inhabit universities that don't force us to make that choice.

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