A Nomad of Academia. A Thematic Autobiography of Privilege

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Abstract

Written from an autobiographical perspective, this chapter describes experiences of being an ‘international academic’ during the radical transformation of university life into a system that is usually referred to as ‘neoliberalism’. Taking up some of the ideas of Baumann and Donskis (2013) regarding ‘liquid evil’ and the liquidation of the humanities, the emergence of ‘audit culture’ as serving an autopoietic technocracy is being analysed as part of a stroboscopic experiment that has led to the gradual destruction of the university. First hand experiences from the Dutch, British and German universities are compared to argue that although one might be inclined to treat the entire process as completely determined and thus inevitable, fragments and smithereens of resilience might also be considered – and in spite of the otherwise justified pessimism – as moments of disclosure of a possible saving power.

Keywords

privilege – austerity – efficiency – institutional reform – the Netherlands – United Kingdom – Germany

1 A Preamble

In my life as a member of the privileged internationalist class of higher education, there are only a few traces of my class background left. As Didier Eribon (2016) has shown so well in *Returning to Reims* and has been analysed in such a harrowing detailed fashion by Simon Charlesworth in this book, students with working-class backgrounds have been systematically set up to fail in that system of modern higher education, at least since the 1970s. In order to succeed, I had to erase most of my class background, and my success in

doing so has been the consequence of at least three factors, which I was lucky enough to have been affected by: (1) a privileged trajectory of the differentiated (pre-comprehensive) Dutch secondary education system; (2) a long-standing partnership with a woman from a well-to-do family; and (3) an international university experience. In this contribution, I am exclusively focusing on the third, as this is of direct relevance to the theme of this edited book. It is exactly the ideals that ultimately led to the Bologna-process in Europe (see for example also the contributions of Abraham, Bianchini, and Donskis in this book), that have made a strong impact on my academic career. The fact that these ideals have all but vanished in administrative procedures of what I will refer to as 'audit culture' are also key issues in the aforementioned contributions.

My university education in sociology stretches across three different countries: I did (the equivalent of) my Bachelor's degree in the Netherlands, completed my Master's of Arts in Canada, and obtained my PhD in England. My university career as a lecturer and researcher has been shaped by four different countries: in chronological order, Wales (18 months), the Netherlands (12 months), England (14 years), and Germany (8 years).

Of course, no autobiographical experience can be used for a systematic comparative analysis of universities, let alone university systems in different countries, because too many variables cannot be controlled. Moreover, by their very nature, autobiographies are anecdotal, impressionistic, and deeply subjective. Their primary value lies in providing a symptomatic illustration of what would otherwise remain mere generalised abstractions, enabling readers to identify in a more concrete manner with the matters of concern being raised. It thus fits well within the established, and currently reviving tradition of 'autoethnography' (cf. Holman Jones, 2005).

2 The Institutional Reproduction of Privilege

Because of the nature of this book, I want to illustrate the impact of – for want of a better word – the neoliberalisation of higher education. However, it must be stressed from the outset, that what is normally referred to by this label is neither new nor liberal (let alone liberalising) by any stretch of the imagination. It is exactly one of these zombie concepts (also see the contribution by Donskis in this book) that mediate what he referred to as 'liquid evil': it intervenes, seduces, manipulates, and then withdraws again into the shadows, like an intangible, shallow Prometheus. What this label 'neoliberal' perhaps more accurately stands for is the recapturing and securing of a reproduction of a

social order most commonly described as 'capitalist' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2017), but manifesting itself in a more limited fashion as the naturalisation of white, male, bourgeois privilege.

In *Moral Blindness*, Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis (2013) reflect on the transformations of university life under the condition of what Bauman (2000) once referred to as 'liquid modernity', which is a sociologised version of what is often referred to as neoliberalism. '[T]he present day strategy of commercialisation coupled with a refusal to recognise any value that is not commercial and any potential except sales potential [has not] necessarily augured a more secure life for the endemic university values...' (ibid., 142). However, what they have failed to recognise is what is at the core of Simon Charlesworth's contribution to this book: The entire liquidation of the traditional academy was only possible because of the manufacturing of a reserve army of doctoral students, many of whom turned to a mere 'standing reserve' of sessional lecturers, part-time tutors, and teaching assistants, or simply cast off as 'failures' to the growing pool of overqualified, overeducated, unemployed postgraduates. The liquidation of the academy required such a standing reserve exactly because it enabled those, privileged enough to work within it, to continue the institutionalised pretence of value accumulation.

Whereas the academics with secure positions inside universities might lament the 'good old days' of the academy operating under the conditions of 'solid modernity', their suffering is nothing compared to those who have been at the receiving end of the circulation of devalued credentials. However, it is exactly the generation of this standing reserve that has enabled the unfolding of this liquid evil of inconsequential instantaneity. The main brunt of the costs of liquid modernity has been externalised and as a result those inside the academy have been able to actively participate in these processes, as '...accomplices in that accomplishment' (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 140).

In what follows, I am autobiographically engaging with my own accomplishments as an accomplice of the liquidation of the academy. When I entered the Dutch university system as a student in 1985, access to higher education was still somewhat of a political issue. Students from families with limited economic means were allowed to have a stipend; there were no tuition fees and there were no severe repercussions for not finishing your degree within a certain period. This all changed in the subsequent years. With the introduction of student loans, tuition fees, and punitive measures for exceeding the maximum duration of study, university life in the Netherlands succumbed to the logic of rationalisation. All of a sudden, I had to organise my life and studies to maximise efficiency rather than the pursuit of knowledge or research-related interests, face considerable future debt, and worry about how to transform my

university degree into an asset on the labour market. As I had chosen to read sociology (having switched from psychology), this of course was by no means self-evident as it raised the question: what is sociology good for?

Already during my second year of studying sociology, it became apparent that one possible way to deal with the inevitable threat of future labour market insecurity was to compete in the university's internal market of student-assistants. Until then, competitiveness was restricted to grades for exams and discussions during seminars and – being a highly competitive person (a legacy from being an outcast in a more elitist grammar school) – I might have been better prepared than most of my cohort. I became a research-assistant in my third undergraduate year, and this enabled me to interact and socialise with academic staff on slightly different terms.

When the first opportunity to study a year abroad in Canada emerged, I was the first to apply (because of my position, I knew of it sooner than the other students did) and got it. This enabled me to enter a Master's programme before even finishing my undergraduate degree. University life in Canada was more competitive than in the Netherlands, although at that time, I had no idea this might have been institutionalised as part of concerted effort by the elite to ensure they always ended up on top.

Grades function as a means of differentiating between students, transforming cultural capital into educational capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and classifying and selecting students according to what are believed to be 'their cognitive abilities' (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Simon Charlesworth (2000; also see his contribution to this book), however, adds to this an extremely important insight: the institutional processes of higher education function to value and devalue, not simply by means of imposing a grading system but also by means of personalising this (de)valuation, so as to present success and failure as the natural consequence of pre-established personal qualities. However, because universities do not offer opportunities to actualise the potentialities they create as part of their everyday practices, they are setting up to fail exactly those students that do not have access to such means of actualisation outside of the university.

My own autobiography is a perfect example of this. By becoming a research student in the second year of my undergraduate degree, I was already privileged, because working as part of a research team already allowed me to actualise what it meant to be a sociologist, without even having finished my first degree. From that moment onwards, being a sociology student had a certain objectivity, because I could be objectively constituted within the institutional setting of a university. This gap between possibility and actuality, which marks the condition of being a student just as much as being unemployed, was thus

being reduced by the mere fact of activity, from which significance is being derived. This significance finds its realisation in evaluations of both others as well as myself. One does not need to become a research or teaching assistant as a student to be able to succeed, but if one is unable to be objectified outside of the university, which is the privilege of those in possession of sufficient (economic, social, cultural) capital, it is one of the few ways that are left.

There is, however, another way and that is 'going international'. Being a foreign student erases most of the hallmarks of a class-based *habitus*, as one becomes recoded as 'foreign'; hence traits that would be considered 'vulgar' to indigenous elites can all of a sudden become interesting in their own right, as they are attributed to some exotic, foreign national culture, whilst simultaneously being able to claim 'intercultural competences' (also see Bianchini, in this book). Being an overseas student in Canada wiped away the stigmas of being a student from a working-class background. I could subsequently reinvent myself and intensify my elite trajectory. Gaining the confidence to speak in public, deploy intimate knowledge of a foreign culture, being bilingual, etc., all helped to propel my early career as a promising young scholar. The fact that I was white and male constituted equally important aspects of my normalisation. Whereas Charlesworth (in this book) is absolutely right that exactly these two features work to your disadvantage if you are unable to avoid the stigma of being a working-class low-life, it is amazing how easily these codes switch once you are adopted as one of the middle class. Different from all other 'traits' of what feminists have referred to as 'intersectionality', class is not simply a factor among many, one that adds up to the others; class is a polarity switch for the privileged. White working-class males are the pariahs of university life, whereas white middle-class masculinity is the norm-setting ideal.

Being set in my favour, the modes of selection of higher education enabled me to compete on unequal terms, first during my Master's in Canada, secondly when obtaining my first-degree summa cum laude in the Netherlands, and thirdly by being awarded a scholarship to do my PhD at Lancaster University in the UK. After arriving in Lancaster, I was immediately offered the opportunity to work as a seminar tutor, thus closing the final gap between possibility and actuality, as I could then build up the teaching-experience that had thus far eluded me.

3 Austerity and Efficiency

From the start of my life in higher education (in the 1980s) onwards, I have been confronted with an almost uninterrupted series of reforms, instigated

by both national governments as well as university administrations. These reforms all went in one and the same direction: a reduction of input and an increase in expected output. There have always been cutbacks in resources and reductions of time, at the same time, students were expected to become more instrumentally oriented, to focus on acquiring skills (rather than knowledge) that are relevant to the labour market (rather than intellectual pursuits), and to complete their studies faster and according to fixed programmes. Relevance had been redefined as that which served the needs of business and industry, and critical thought was generally considered to be at best a luxury and at worst a hindrance.

In the UK it is commonly accepted that this transformation coincided with the biggest cultural-political revolution in the British Isles since Oliver Cromwell: Thatcherism. Thatcherism is basically a clever mixture of: (a) crude capitalist political economy, which comes down to a kleptocratic transfer of resources from the poor to the rich via institutional means (such as 'deregulation' and 'privatisation'); (b) a sugar coating of inequalities and injustices under the label of 'liberalism' and 'free markets' (even if these markets were already completely oligarchic); and (c) a nationalistic form of authoritarian populism. Thatcherism preached a neoliberalism – as an expression of There Is No Alternative (see Donskis, in this book) – that it did not practice. It did not create free markets but destroyed them; it did not establish equal opportunities but amplified distinctions based on class, ethnicity, and gender, and it made sure those at the receiving end of the stick blamed foreigners (most notably the EU but also immigrants) for their 'misfortunes'. In this sense, it is a prime example of what Donskis (in this book) has referred to as 'liquid evil'.

However, contrary to my dear British colleagues, I am not convinced this model – though extreme it certainly was – was in essence unique to the UK. At exactly the same time as Thatcher declared war on the unions and civil society, the Netherlands was also experimenting with similar forces, albeit in a spirit of consensual hallucination (the so-called *poldermodel*: see Kuypers, 2015). During the 1980s, the most progressive Dutch public broadcaster, the VPRO, declared that the nation was at risk of *verloedering*, that is, succumbing to a culture of sleaze. Pointing to the work of the culture industries – television, film, radio, music, newspapers, and magazines – it was apparent that Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979) thesis from 1944 was still remarkably accurate, perhaps even more so than during the time of its publication. Inundated with sleaze of the lowest common denominator, Dutch popular culture turned anti-intellectual, celebrating its own ignorance as bliss, insisting on 'speaking your mind', whilst refusing to listen to anyone else.

In the Netherlands, the 1980s sowed the seeds for the populist demagoguery of Dutch right-wing populists such as Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders.¹ It was the same cultural breeding ground for a new type of student, for whom a university degree was merely an affirmation of their entitlement to superiority. They flocked to the burgeoning degrees in economics, business administration, and public administration. They were both the beneficiaries and executives of the 'neoliberal turn'. Austerity served them well, because their accumulation of wealth was never going to be affected by the quality of public services or education. Universities in the UK had been caught-up in this process as well. They were actively encouraged to marketize their research and teaching: deliver products and services to customers and users. One of the first domains where this took place was the acquisition of international PhD students, of which I was a beneficiary. It is no surprise that this was the favourite strategy of universities from the outset, as (overseas) PhD students do not require a lot of investment of resources (as a PhD is to a large extent based on self-directed learning), but they can be charged very high fees. Moreover, because of the fact that these students would mostly go back to their native countries, the risks of a reputation loss for the supervisor could be minimised to those involved in the behind-closed-doors affair of the *viva voce*.

The second strand of the 'neoliberalisation' of higher education in the United Kingdom that started in the early 1990s was the introduction of auditing for research and teaching. Audit culture is often 'sold' as a necessary corollary of deregulation and deployed as a means of controlling that the levels of quality of research and teaching are of a standard considered appropriate. For research audits, however, this was blatantly ignored, as it became the means for justifying decisions related to resource-allocation. The exercise was from the outset an assessment rather than an audit and subsequently turned into kind of credit rating linked to a selective distribution of rewards. Competition between universities was thus now fought in the arena of the research assessment exercise, that is, a peer-based affirmation of credibility and sign value. The criteria for assessing quality are of course all very subjective and – as with all aspects of cycles of credit – based on the relative strength mustered by the networks of 'evaluation': that means they are political.

1 Pim Fortuyn was instrumental in transforming the financing of student loans, having set up a system during his time as a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Education, which forced all students to transfer parts of their student loans into rail cards, managed by a privately-owned limited company, of which he became the managing director. Ten years later, he became the voice of racist, Islamophobic, Dutch nationalism, having left the Dutch Labour Party, which had served him so well during his time as a civil servant and director of the quango 'OV Studentenkaart BV'.

4 Audit Culture and the Rise of Social Constructionism

That Thatcherism fosters a politicization of science was, however, hardly visible to social scientists at that time, primarily because these were engaged in arguing that the products of scientific work were social constructions. In a perverse way, the argument that scientists were not engaged in 'making reality speak the truth' but in hermeneutic negotiations over the establishment meaning – which was the hallmark of social constructionism – perfectly fed the Thatcherite reforms of higher education. The actual fall out of this, however, would not be visible until the rise of climate change denial, and above all Trumpism and its deployment of alternative facts nearly three decades later.

Universities in the Netherlands and the UK both experienced the rise of audit culture during the 1990s. Audit culture is closely associated with blame culture (Van Loon, 2002) and the culture of fear (Furedi, 2002; also see Donskis in this book) and is a perfect example of a reflexively modern response to the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), which marks a reinvention of politics (Beck, 1997) that no longer adheres to any humanist understanding of the political but has become deeply technocratic (Bauman & Donskis, 2013). The idea was that the state needs to be able to trace how 'its' money has been spent in terms of research and teaching, as a means of controlling risks and governing actions. Financial audits had already been established long before the rise of Thatcherism or the Polder Model, as capitalism and kleptocracy are often very close bedfellows. However, rather than using the suspicion of theft as the reason behind the audit, policy makers had adopted another phantom of 1980s sleaze culture: quality-management, which a bit later was to be rephrased as the 'management of excellence'.

Politicians and policy makers in governments and universities established a discourse of auditing that could be linked easily to promoting and even producing 'quality' (or 'excellence'). Enhancing quality was not just the objective of auditing; it became its equivalent. In order to compare different universities, quantities had to be produced. That is, the discourse of quality required technologies of quantification to enable comparisons and establish the normal of best practice. The same quantities were also associated with the redistribution of financial resources. 'Quality Speak' thus became entangled with the circulation of credit. Although this has been part and parcel of the modern university system since its reconfiguration as an institution of the nation state at the turn of the twentieth century (Gouldner, 1970), cycles of credits were the exclusive domain of scientists; with the turn to audit culture, however, they became the property of university administrators.

Quality enhancement as the result of auditing, which itself is based on technologies of quantification that translate differentially enhanced qualities into cycles of credit, has of course nothing to do with good research or good teaching, but with the ability to optimise quantification. The current deployment of impact factors is a perfect example of this. An impact factor is a compound of the frequency of citation and the weight of the publishing venues where these citations appear. Impact is measured as the consequence of impact measurement. The impact factor has nothing to do with the quality of the research to which it has been attached, but with the social process of imitation that grants it its reputation.

Whereas the quantification of research quality still has a pretence of objectivity, no such thing has been remotely achieved by audits of university teaching. These are formalised impressionistic judgements based on highly subjective student evaluations, screenings of curriculum materials, and samples of observations of class-room-based teaching. Doing well in teaching and learning audits usually means that you need to tick the right boxes and speak the right lingo (see the contributions of both Sabelis and Wels in this book).

Auditing practices have led to the formalisation and standardisation of 'quality speak', a bit of jargon championed by university administrators, also known as 'managerialism' (Bauman & Donskis, 2013). In due course, all universities have become experienced in deploying quality speak for the sole purpose of being successfully audited. It is, however, dangerously wrong to suggest that 'this is mere speak', as if it were without consequences. During my first years as a university lecturer, first in England, followed by Wales and the Netherlands, we were trained to perform for audits. We were actively encouraged to adopt 'quality speak' in our course material and handbooks; we were also instructed to plan our publications exclusively with an eye to the Research Enhancement Audit years before its due date. My work as an academic has been influenced by audit culture from the very beginning.

Audit culture has thereby become an example par excellence of what Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994) collectively referred to as 'reflexive modernisation'.² Generating data constituting their own objectivity is equally well described as autopoiesis (Luhmann, 1984). Auditing research as well as teaching and learning has moulded the objective forms of academic life and fine-tuned the

² I should say that the three social theorists were actually referring to different processes. Whereas Beck deployed it to describe the inevitable backlash-effects of intended consequences (e.g. risks) on institutional practices, Giddens was referring to cognitive (reflective) operations in the realm of subjective consciousness, and Lash was primarily concerned with aesthetic judgments of a decentred, post-humanist mode of subjectification.

academic disciplines to imitate the modes of subjectification designed to enable 'management'. This self-referential closure also meant that the 'neoliberal turn' seemed to be natural, self-evident, self-explanatory, and without any alternative.

As I moved from Wales to the Netherlands and a year later again back across the North Sea to England, one thing that struck me was that despite considerable differences in the organisation and administration of university life in Cardiff, Amsterdam, and Nottingham, all three universities were facing similar pressures to economise and rationalise university education, streamline research to the needs of business and government, and embrace audit culture as the means to achieve these. Also, remarkably similar was the lack of organised resistance. In my case, being so highly attuned to the competitive nature of university life also meant I was deeply sceptical about any allusion to the collectivisation of interests. Having been well-trained in the techniques of individuated performativity, I knew how to respond to the requests for data for the purposes of quality control, was able to adopt the quality speak in terms of self-representation, and always made sure that quantities rather than arguments based on justice or fairness formed the basis of claims for recognition and rewards.

However, perhaps an additional reason why universities were so slow to sense the danger and so pathetic in organising alternatives, was that their own decision-making bodies were made up of academics, who often had no clue of what they were doing, whereas the administration was in the hands of professionals, who knew exactly what they wanted and where to get it. For example, at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where I worked during the academic year 1996/1997, over 50% of employees were working for the administration. That means: more people were involved in 'supporting' (and above all regulating and controlling) the primary processes than actually delivering anything. Of course, it might also be the case that they knew very well what they were doing.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the neoliberal turn in higher education has not resulted in a reduction of bureaucratic overhead expenditure, but has in fact increased it. The people who most emphatically advocated the reforms that were in line with the wider political-economic restructuring of (at that time still globalist) late-capitalism were also those who were able to self-referentially operationalise it, as a result of which they themselves became the measurement of 'their' success.

During the same period in which the neoliberal turn was able to transform institutions of higher education into self-referential, self-valorising quality-machines, whose 'impact' was exclusively measured by its ability to meet the needs of business and government, there was also a significant paradigm shift

within the magical, secluded world of 'science theory' (Philosophy of Science, *Wissenschaftstheorie*, etc.). What had been problematically labelled during the late 1980s as 'the postmodern turn' was in effect a shift in orientation on the question of validity. Whereas 'methods' formed the cornerstone of most scientific disciplines until the arrival of postmodernism, they became the target of intense scepticism and incredulity afterwards.

The social sciences and humanities were at the forefront of this shift. By being able to show that scientific truths are – in the final analysis – nothing but truth-claims, they were able to use the opposition between reality and representation, which had been the cornerstone of notions of Truth (for both its rationalist and empiricist variants), and deploy it as an antidote against itself. If truths cannot be separated from truth-claims, then every truth always bears the mark of a particular interest or a combination of interests as the motivation behind the claim. Then scientific truth becomes a matter of politics (Latour, 2007; Van Loon, 2002; also see Kamsteeg in this book).

For those who – perhaps inspired by Karl Mannheim as a founding father of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge – had already taken this position as part of a critical stance, this initially might have had a positive resonance, but its critical sting quickly vanished with a more nihilistic turn. If all truth-claims are political, and thus an expression of the will to power, then this also applies to truth-politics itself. There is no critical 'time out' from where to judge the cynical deployment of claims ironically. When one can no longer claim naïve sanctuary (because God is dead and we killed him), the ironic distancing itself becomes the expression of a deep cynicism.

Avoiding the abyss of realising the fatal strategy of cynical nihilism, those convinced that truths are inseparable from truth-claims preferred to embrace a milder version: social constructionism. This preached that whatever truths might be 'out there', we do not need to concern ourselves with them but only with what is said about them. By being agnostic about the question of truth, social constructionism cultivated a more pragmatic orientation. The dangerous nihilistic sting of situating truth-claims as political could be circumvented by addressing social constructions as cultural forms: they are more often than not the consequence of negotiations, subjective expectations, and hermeneutic traditions.

Depoliticising the paradigm shift transformed social constructionism into an ideal counterpart of the neoliberal turn. After all, as universities were valued primarily for their impact on business and government, deliberating the political or metaphysical nature of truth-claims became simply obsolete in the face of the more pragmatic question: is it working? Social constructionism did not pose a threat to the reforms of higher education exactly because it had already

adopted a post-nihilistic stance. Likewise, theories of reflexive modernisation and autopoiesis may perfectly describe how auditing practices establish their own objectivity; they are unable to instigate critical thought that might generate alternatives. This is a well-known phenomenon as part of wider processes of bureaucratisation (cf. Luhmann, 1998).

5 Stroboscopic Practices of Institutional Reform

In breath-taking analyses of processes of environmental de(con)struction, James Morrow (2017) described one example of how the town of Sheffield itself had become the bedding ground of the Thatcherist revolution during the mid-1980s. Environment establishes everyday life and not the other way round. By destroying the infrastructure of the coal-mining industry, the Thatcher government choked the life out of the working-class communities in and around Sheffield. By the time the miner's resistance had been decimated, it was fairly easy to establish a new, post-industrial landscape deploying the destitute, precarious remnants of the working class, who were no longer able to collectivise and resist. Expanding higher education to accommodate for this now obsolete 'labour force' was both clever and effective. Promising skills that were never taught, which were held like the proverbial carrot that makes the donkey pull the cart, credentialism and meritocracy were mere public-relations window dressing and enabled those inside the academy to produce accounts of value accumulation without having to significantly increase their workloads.

This analysis would have been equally suitable to institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom. After a series of reforms and cutbacks, a new era of managerialism had been established during the 1990s, in which those involved in university education were completely individuated and the vast majority of students put in a position of permanent precariousness. That many university degrees had no value, because nothing was being taught and the only usable transferable skill was the ability to deploy exclusive means of self-actualisation that were not offered by universities themselves, only worked to its advantage as there was no exteriority which could serve as a reality check (in the sense of Ulrich Beck's version of reflexive modernity).

Morrow referred to the destruction of the working-class environment as stroboscopic. With this he means, that there are many individual instances, facts so to speak, that seem to be disconnected and are therefore not linked as part of one and the same process (of class warfare). For example, different pieces of legislation related to trade unions, education, the funding of community arts, public transportation, housing, and financing local authorities

may not seem to add up. However, once lined up in a sequence, they suddenly display a complete unfolding. Many individual changes may appear to be very local, gradual, and very slow, but then all of a sudden everything is different. Stroboscopic reforms unfold as if they were meticulously planned, 'under cover' so to speak, even if this might often not have been the case.

The gradual destruction of university life in England and Wales took a sudden, radical turn with the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 (by the then Labour government). This, however, was eclipsed in England by the Higher Education Act 2004 (again by a Labour government). Under the Act, universities in England could begin to charge variable fees of up to £3,000 a year, as the system had been deregulated further. This was much more radical than it had been in the Netherlands during the 1980s, because they were not accompanied by a generic financial support (topped up by loans). In England and Wales, students were not offered generic stipends but still had to pay tuition fees that were steep from the outset. At the same time, central funding for universities was cut and linked to performance indicators derived from research audits, learning-and-teaching audits and above all student numbers.

Universities were now competing with other universities (for the right to call themselves 'centres of excellence'), departments within universities were competing with each other, and even the competition between individual academics became attached to much more serious consequences such as 'performance-related pay'. Additionally, obtaining 'international students' became imperative for universities and departments to sustain themselves. These students had to be treated as customers who expected services in exchange for the high tuition fees. They could therefore not be failed easily, and, as a result, departments started to perform all kinds of additional services in order to satisfy customer need and minimise the risks of litigation.

These processes went hand in hand with a systematic reduction or expenditure on staff or students. Whereas during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the salaries and bonuses of university executives increased dramatically, and many universities were engaged in high-risk financial investments and high-profile building projects, actual per capita investment in learning and teaching decreased. At the same time, however, the salaries of lecturers have dramatically stagnated and their pension funds have been raided. Additionally, research funding was increasingly concentrated mostly in the hands of elite institutions that were already wealthy, creating a university system with a very small but well-funded elite at the top and an increasingly marginalised and underfunded 'tail' of mediocre institutions jostling for positions that hardly matter.

At least in Europe, England and Wales were at the vanguard of this slash-and-burn tactic of neoliberal institutional reform. This was not some haphazard,

opportunistic political process, but strategically planned with full knowledge of the consequences because it was based on decades of experience of downgrading public services as a means to enable (cheap) privatisation (cf. Morrow, 2017). The fact that in 2018 many universities in England declared that they were unable to sustain the pension schemes for their lecturing staff is merely one consequence of the transformation of higher education.

Although I have not had any personal experience of working in a university in the Netherlands since the mid-1990s, I am quite certain the developments there have not been as radical as in England and Wales (but unfolding in a similar direction). This is largely because the radicalisation of the elite establishment in the Netherlands has been less draconian in socioeconomic terms, and been more preoccupied with xenophobic identity politics vis-à-vis migrants and refugees. Even if the preaching of radical neoliberalism has ceaselessly deployed the minarets of the national newspapers and broadcasters to enable a normalisation of the underlying economic violence – for example with the threat of capital outflow terrorising any government that suggests holding the business and finance sectors more accountable – the Dutch form of right-wing populism has never held a majority government in the Netherlands. To put it differently, the timeframe of the stroboscopic practices of institutional reform could be drastically reduced in the UK because there were and are fewer checks and balances in place there.

It should come as no surprise that the consequences for those involved in academic work have been enormous. Ever since returning to work as an academic in England in 1996, I have had to face a year-on-year increasing workload and, although my salary has not been curbed as much due to successive promotions, those starting at a lecturer level in 2010 were in a far worse position than I was 10 years earlier in terms of pay, job security, and work load. For example, in 1996, the average university lecturer at my university (Nottingham Trent) would be teaching eight contact hours per week; by the time I left the UK in 2010, this had been increased to 15. Increased student numbers, necessary for the university to meet its business targets, meant that the class and number of Bachelor's theses had also doubled, whereas the number of staff available for teaching and marking has remained the same for 15 years. As a result, contact hours per student were reduced as were time for supervision and feedback. While students had to pay more and more tuition fees, they obtained less and less 'value for money'.

During my final years at Nottingham Trent University (NTU), I had the privilege of becoming involved in middle management. Here, the language of neoliberal reform had been fully incorporated. During the first wave of major institutional reform, NTU had abandoned its organisational structure and merged several faculties into 'schools'. This enabled the university executive to

devolve responsibility for success, and above all failure, to lower levels, whilst at the same time creating internal markets to enhance 'competitiveness'. Schools may seem to have greater financial authority, but the Quarterly Business Review ensured that schools had to adhere to performance indicators that were centrally imposed and evaluated. As with many other universities, the main emphasis in these QBRs was on generating more income, either through greater numbers of domestic and above all overseas students or through the acquisition of 'third stream income'. Because NTU was not a high-performing research university, a significant part of the latter was geared towards the generation of 'transferable knowledge' that could be of direct service to commercial enterprises. Schools that were unable to generate more income were forced to cut expenditures.

Within less than 10 years, Nottingham Trent University had ceased to be a university but had become a business. For example, whereas in 2001 the Research Assessment Exercise was still the most significant measurement of the standing of the university, this was much less of a priority in 2008. Instead, one of its new key performance indicators was 'employability', for which it boasted an extremely high success rate in terms of graduates finding employment. By contrast, the university's standing in terms of research is comparatively modest: in 2014, it occupied the 84th place (out of 128 and six places lower than in 2008).³

6 Exit Neoliberalism?

Moving to Germany in 2010 to take up a Chair in General Sociology and Sociological Theory at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt was an extremely important decision for the whole of our family. With the return of the Conservative Party to power in 2010 on the back of the collapse of the financial markets in 2007/2008, the urgency to leave the island could not have been greater. As a result, I did not have to think long before accepting the offer of a permanent professorship.

The system in Germany is very different compared to both the Netherlands and the UK. In Germany, as a rule the only academic staff holding permanent positions in universities are professors and 'Akademische Räte'. The latter are, however, more of an exception. At first sight, this looks even worse than in the UK and the Netherlands because most teaching staff in universities are on

3 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ref-2014-results-table-of-excellence/2017590.article>.

fixed-term (and often part-time) contracts and these can stretch over 12 years. However, the purpose of this is not as much cost-reduction but obtaining qualifications. Most lecturers at German universities are in the process of obtaining PhDs or *Habilitations* (a post-doctoral degree). Unlike in the UK, a doctorate is not exclusively relevant for higher education but is a qualification that is in greater demand in the labour market, both in the private as well as in the public sector. Hence, despite the fact that most lecturers and researchers in German universities are not in permanent positions, their precariousness is moderated by a greater amount of opportunities outside of the higher education sector.

German universities still bear some of the traces of their pre-modern predecessors and still adhere to a guild-like structure revolving around patron-client relationships between a professor and her/his assistants and the wider student-body. The 'chair' (*Lehrstuhl*) is the key organisational actor and therefore the central unit of administration. Unlike in the UK, therefore, a professor is not some honorary title that allows for an increase in salary and a bigger office (alongside a reduction in teaching load and administrative responsibilities). Instead, a professor is responsible for all the teaching, research, and administration of the chair, and professors are expected to also play a leading role in fulfilling administrative and organisational duties beyond the realm of the chair, for example, in faculties and other administrative bodies and committees. In other words, professors in German universities have much more autonomy but also bear greater levels of responsibility than their British and Dutch counterparts.

This older structure has proven to be a major factor of resilience against the neoliberal onslaught. Of course, German universities have not been immune to this and, especially in relation to research and teaching audits, attempts have been made to introduce rankings. The German Research Funding Council (DFG) has had a major impact on the concentration of research in certain universities (via so called 'Excellence Initiatives', Special Research Areas (SFBs), and Graduate Colleges) and thus the formation of 'elites', but these have by and large not pandered to the immediate needs of business and government. That is to say, the German system seems to have kept a closer affinity to the notion of 'academic freedom' as a prerequisite for the pursuit of knowledge. Impact-factors and bibliometrics, for example, are not deployed as some kind of Holy Grail to decipher the relevance or significance of research. Audit culture and its corollary of quantification are actually quite frequently frowned upon as instruments of 'banalisation' and 'managerialism'.

The resilience of German universities against neoliberalism, however, is much less ideological than I may have suggested. Indeed, in the face of

neoliberal reform, ideology is of little significance. Much more important for explaining the German resilience to the neoliberal onslaught (or the inertia of its impact) is law. As a result of the experiences with the Third Reich, the post-war German state has been legally configured in such a way that most institutional processes are based on written statutes that cannot be changed willy-nilly but have to go through lengthy procedures involving a wider-range of official bodies, some of which consist of elected members (like the Senate). Resistance to reform thus forms the very core of institutional operations.

Most neoliberal reforms have taken place with little legal anchoring; they thrive exactly there where law is most easily instrumentalised to fit the needs of elites. The German experience with the Third Reich was exactly that: law was being instrumentalised and had no built-in resilience. However, in the age of Trump, Putin, Erdogan, Orban, and Brexit – which contrary to common belief is not a contradiction to neoliberalism – the German system shows its durability and strength, not because it somehow magically pre-empts authoritarian populism but because it resists its normalisation in legal terms. Unfortunately, the lessons learnt from the Third Reich seem to affect only certain nation states.

However, Bianchini (in this book) suggests that it is a mere matter of time before the Germans will also embrace the same fate as their British and Dutch counterparts. Indeed, universities such as the Technische Universität Munich are explicitly modelling themselves on the Ivy League in the USA. The legal inertia that was a consequence of a built-in institutional resistance to radicalisation is unlikely to withstand the sheer economic power of global capitalism indefinitely, especially as this form of power has been able to circumvent the alleged sovereignty of nation-states so effectively in the last 40 years. The relative ease with which German politicians, for example, supported far-reaching trade agreements such as Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and the first drafts of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) suggests that there are already many forces at work that seek to put the law firmly under the control of the interests of multinationals.

It is from this perspective that the Netherlands is such an interesting case. Having embarked on quite radical institutional reforms that enabled the neoliberal onslaught very early, Dutch higher education has not (yet) been reformed as radically as its Anglo-Saxon counterparts (although insiders have said this is changing fast, which is to be expected following the successive shifts to the right of politics in the Netherlands). This relative inertia is certainly also due to the legal anchoring of the institutionalisation of universities in the Netherlands and, if the resilience may be less ideological than in Germany, this still has some impact on slowing down the instrumentalization of research, learning, and teaching. Anti-intellectualism and authoritarian populism have

a much stronger footing in the Dutch public sphere than in Germany, but it has not (yet) been as effective in binding higher education exclusively to the needs of the powerful.

For me personally, working in German higher education has offered me a lifeline for now, but not likely for much longer. However, 'where danger is, the saving power grows also' (Hölderlin, quoted in Heidegger, 1977, p. 42). If one is able to continue to pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge, develop critical faculties without suffering financial repercussions, and cultivate thinking as the most vital 'transferrable skill', one might perhaps collectively generate sufficient staying power to go against the grain or at least to slow it down. If neoliberalism is merely a subsequent phase in the tragedy of capitalism's attempts to overcome its contradictions, then it too will be washed away, 'like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault, 1970: p. 387).

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