

Chapter 5

Performing Academics: Return to Meritocracy?

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing number of critics who claim that modern changes of the university, based on the market fundamentalism and performance management paradigm, undermine the academic culture, ethos and trust and weaken the cultural mission of the university. The chapter focuses on a critique of the ongoing erosion of an important cultural function performed until very recently by the Western universities, which is democratization of social life through development of critical thinking, imagination, and through cultivation of social and humanistic sensibility. The main aim of this chapter is to analyze the current state of the corporate university and to reflect on the bureaucracy as a potential solution for the neoliberal limitations.

I would not belong to any club that would have me as a member. (Groucho Marx)

The dilemma that faces companies in the new information economy is that capitalist success is possible only if communism continues to prevail among most researchers. (Pascal Jollivet)

INTRODUCTION

According to some research findings about the consequences of adapting performance management imperative into universities, there is a more and more visible erosion of the social ties at the university, the academic ethos, teaching and research quality, family life and even mental health of academics (Alveson, 2013; Craig et al., 2014; Izak et. al., in press). What is observed is that – according to the neoliberal pressure – more and more academics in the world conduct research mainly to meet the reporting require-

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ments and the excellence ranking lists (Münch, 2014; Tourish & Willmott, 2015). As a result, work at the university – teaching, research, but also administrative work – becomes an autonomous goal in itself and often takes place at the expense of academic values and in accordance with the logic of survival of individuals (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Zawadzki, in press). Should we then return to the bureaucracy? Is bureaucracy a better solution for academics affected by the negative consequences connected with reforming contemporary universities through the New Public Management model?

BACKGROUND

Bureaucracies are not loved, nor are they admired. But they are everywhere, and everywhere they are grudgingly recognized, accepted, tolerated, maintained. Some people didn't like Bush when he was a president, and some do not like Obama when he is. But very few people question the necessity of a president and of a federal administration, i.e. functionaries of a bureaucracy, in the USA. Most people think, or at least have a gut feeling in spite of the easy stereotypes and media-bashing that some bureaucracy is inevitable and desirable if we are to delegate some authority and to monitor the results in a transparent manner. After all, bureaucracy was one of the stepping stones from divine and secular dictatorships to democracy. It reinforced resistance to dictatorships and sustained the egalitarian tendencies towards meritocracy. This is what we like to call a democracy. Democracy is run for all of us and is built on equality, but it gives rise to new inequalities, even if these new inequalities tend to be more local and more transient, more temporary, too. Bureaucratic inequalities are less robust than the other ones. Descendants of the Norman conquerors of England in 1066 may still prevail upon their Anglo-Saxon subjects among students in Oxford or Cambridge, but sons and daughters of prime ministers do not inherit the power positions, Nigela Lawson's celebrity status notwithstanding.

Not that democracy equals equality. All men may be created equal, but some are elected or trained to serve in bureaucracies and then they may sometimes become more equal than the others. The paradox of the marriage of true inquisitive minds (academic community) to multiple bureaucracies (universities, research centers, knowledge intensive organizations, media) lies at the heart of our academic professional lives. We praise merit but we love equality in pursuit of truth, too. What is our academic community, after all? Our academic community is composed of numerous (virtually "clouded") networks floating through knowledge spaces, but always with an anchor ready to be dropped in the home port of our professional bureaucracies (a university, a research institute, an academy of science, a learned society or a media platform).

The paradox of our academic community consists of the fact that we all complain about bureaucracy, but see no better defense against ideological storms of populism, neoliberalism, commercialism, technocracy, kleptocracy and whimsical, cruel tyranny. Bureaucratic routines seem to better protect us from self-exploitation as emergent entrepreneurs in cognitive capitalist societies than ideological sirens, which promise to liberate us from capitalist chains. Bureaucracy is still preferable to a sectarian party seducing us into a collective quest for a holy grail of individual creativity and organizational excellence, even if the latter is fluent in orchestrating spontaneous outbursts of mass anger or subverting the judiciary and terrorizing hostage societies.

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