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theory & politics in organization

From Enthusiasm to Exhaustion: A Day in the Life of a Human Geography Lecturer*

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My Role in Discussing the Modern University

In this piece I want to offer a few reflections regarding my own place in the behemoth structure that is academia: I'm far from unique, and many things I have to say have been said before. Indeed, I deliberated over whether to write this contribution at all due to my concerns regarding the 'production' of academic knowledge (see Fuller and Askins, 2007), having spent some time (re)reading some of the relevant literature (that 'spare' time around teaching, meetings, marking and e-mail that I could find). Starting with the Antipode special edition of 2000 that examined "how the dynamics of contemporary capitalism are straining and splitting apart the university as a space of critical intellectual citizenship" (Castree and Sparke, 2000: 222), I followed links both pre and post that volume. And two things struck me: first, how much I agreed with all the critiquing of university corporatization, calls for critical engagements, and interrogation of what constitutes relevance in academic work, etc.; second, *how much we have written* critiquing university corporatization, calling for critical engagement and interrogating what constitutes relevance in academic work!

Obviously, I have decided to add to this body of writing, and I want to explain why. A key reason involves supporting what's already been said elsewhere to build consensus and *move towards change*. This is connected to issues that I consider central within my work – these issues form the substantive part of this paper and revolve around space, place, social justice, and education. And as part of these broader concerns, there is also a personal political project, which is to adopt a narrative strategy/style that endeavours to disrupt/challenge/question dominant structures of writing as part of my own commitment to critical engagement, following Cixous' (1991) conceptualisation of writing as 'a call to action, revolution and transgression' (see also Bingham, 2003; Crang, 2003; Hughes et al., 1999; McGregor et al., 2007). Partly recognising writing *as resistance*, but also because I'm tired of my undergraduate students quite legitimately struggling to connect with academic journal papers/texts (not all but many) because

they are, and this is a common quote, 'written in another language'. Why can't work that is rigorous, relevant, empirical, theoretical, thought-provoking be in more accessible language, where possible? The point is, I believe that a key role of the modern university should be good (better) communication, within and without (see Hawkins et al., forthcoming).

My Role/s on June 21st 2007

So, using one single day (notable for me as it is Midsummer's Day here in England, and I have long used the summer and winter solstices to reflect on the passing of time and shifts in my life), I want to consider the ways in which I am positioned by corporatization within the academy and my resistance to it, the activities that I undertake in my own search for relevancy, and the roles I adopt due to my commitment to 'learning' beyond the academy. I guess my hope is to highlight where and how thinking, politics, activism and education are played out in University life (in and beyond its spaces) in complicated ways.

I should briefly explain that this particular day occurs after the end of the teaching year in my institution – after students' exams, so formal teaching and marking is finished. There are, of course, different rhythms at different times of the academic calendar, so my 'day in the life' for June 21st will read quite differently than had I written about a date in semester/term time. However, I believe this is a valid date to explore especially because, while it is a time when I supposedly have less constraints around my working life, in my experience the corporatizing tendrils reach even into this space and time.

09.00 to 12.00

I spent the first part of the day with PGCE students from another university. PGCE is a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, and these were a group of students studying to become geography teachers. Northumbria University is in the city of Newcastle and we offer a PGCE in geography at *primary* school level (ages 5-11), while Newcastle University (referred to as 'across the road' by us at Northumbria) offers a PGCE in geography at *secondary* school level (ages 11-18). Around 24 Newcastle PGCE students were working on designing a 'virtual fieldtrip' to the Ouseburn Valley (an area in Newcastle), preparing case study material to go on-line for access by secondary school geography teachers across the UK (potentially across the world), as part of a larger project co-ordinated by the Geographical Association (GA).[1] I heard about the initiative through a colleague who knew that I'm interested in soundscapes and the aural environment within human geography[2] and asked me if I could get involved. That day,

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1   See www.geography.org.uk regarding the GA; and www.geographyteachingtoday.org.uk regarding this specific project.

2   More broadly, my interests are 'multiculturalism in the everyday': the ways in which difference and similarity between/across people of diverse ethnic backgrounds play out in the banal spaces/places of daily life in exclusionary as well as transformative encounters. My research suggests that exploring 'sense' of place should include beyond the visual if we are to understand notions of belonging in and

I was working with six students who had opted to focus on 'sounding' the Valley, recording soundfiles to be attached to waymarkers on a map, photographing the places, and writing teaching plans to explore the diverse aural environments along the river valley.

Figure 1: PGCE students designing a virtual fieldtrip

I agreed to this work because *I found it interesting* – and in how many professions can we do something because it enthuses us? I want to emphasise that I consider my position relatively privileged, on the whole.[3] I also agreed because I believe that *bridging the gap across university and school education* is important. The UK saw a 29.4% decline in students opting to study geography to examination level at secondary school between 1996 and 2006 (Weedon, 2007), which impacts upon numbers applying to study the subject in higher education. University managers worry about this in terms of 'customer downturn': I was recently at a departmental 'away day' which started by considering 'changes in the market' and discussing the need to diversify the 'product' we deliver – see Tang-Martinez (2002) for a critique of corporate profit-making as negating diverse intellectual inquiry. My point here, though, centres on debate regarding the positive relevance of geography in contemporary society (eg. Castree et al., 2007;

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use of specific sites, and that sound in particular is important in thinking through how people inter/act in public spaces (see Adams et al., 2005).

3   Although I am deeply concerned by the increases in non-tenure/short term positions and erosion of these academic freedoms I'm talking about here – see Bryson (2004).

Lynch, 2007; The Guardian, 2008). Since I agree that (a critical approach to) studying geography is crucial to any transformative politics, linking the significance of geography into everyday spaces and across many places should not only occur in academia, but in education at all levels. Moreover, there are many excellent teachers in schools doing this, and we in academia have as much to learn as to offer, which is only possible through developing networks and bridging any 'divide' between universities and schools (and wider society more broadly, Bonnett, 2003). This issue is not only discipline-specific, and other subjects can/do mount similar arguments regarding relevance beyond the Ivory Tower.

The work with the Newcastle PGCE students raises another issue – while cross-institutional working, sharing expertise and experience may be beneficial to further 'learning' goals there is a sensitive political game played around which universities offer which courses, with management-speak couched along the lines of 'market competition' in terms of students. In the UK, an annual National Student Survey (2008) is conducted among final year undergraduates, who are asked to comment on the education and 'services' they have received, which is reported in a 'league table' format that puts us in *direct competition* with each other – as we are when it comes to bidding for research grants too, generally. This all works against inter-institutional cooperation.

12.00 to 13.30

I then went to an event in Byker (an inner city area of Newcastle, fortunately adjacent to the Ouseburn Valley) organised by the local government authority as part of 'Refugee Week'. Held in Byker Community Centre, the aim was to increase awareness of what being a refugee or asylum seeker involves among long term residents, while also raising awareness of local services among refugees. I went with a group of asylum-seeking and refugee families with whom I'm undertaking long term ethnographic research.

Rather than talk about the event or my research in detail here, I want to raise issues regarding *doing* this research. To date in my post (two and a half years) I haven't found time to apply for research grants because 1) this is my first lecturing job so everything has been prepared from scratch; 2) because I'm employed at a 'teaching-led' university with relatively high teaching loads; 3) because said 'teaching-led' focus offers less support to undertake research (though there is an expectation and contractual obligation to be 'research-active'); 3) because I have two children, an extended family and many other commitments outside of work. I don't intend this as a list of 'excuses' but as a reality.

Figure 2: Refugee Week in Byker, inner city Newcastle

Of course the 'reality' is that I choose to prioritise activities in a certain way due to my personal and professional values – I do find the time most weeks to actually engage in the research, so I could potentially spend two hours every week instead writing proposals, then do the research when I have some grant money. But my feet are firmly in the activist and public academic camps (Chatterton, 2006):[4] I believe it more valuable to be doing the research to inform teaching (see Jenkins et al., 2007) and have input to policy-making (see Ward, 2007) – and I understand these as not independent issues, since teaching our students has obvious relevance to the wider society in terms of their roles after they leave the University (Mitchell, 2004).

So when I do get around to apply for research money, it won't be for a large grant where my time is 'bought out' – I enjoy teaching, I think I'm a pretty OK teacher, and I think teaching remains key within the modern university. I agree with Heyman (2000: 292) that the classroom is "a site of political praxis" and "a crucial place where… 'corporatization' can be challenged", and that we need to think *across* pedagogy and knowledge production if we are to engage with social justice, critical citizenship and participatory democracy – conceptualising the classroom as a space of/for collective engagement (see Evans et al., 2007). Certainly, we should stay aware of Mitchell's (1999: 387) warning regarding the threats to teaching and learning, and in particular to the development of critical thought, from "the commodification of education as 'product', combined with competition from the for-profit private sector".

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4   There is debate regarding what constitutes 'the public academic', here I'm referring to a more 'doing' outside the academy than a 'writing in the public domain' paradigm, though I recognise the latter is important (see Said, 2002).

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13.30 to 14.00

I then rushed back to the office grabbing lunch on the way. There is a serious issue here. Since I became a lecturer I've had some digestive problems, which I believe are partly due to not taking lunch breaks. Typically, either I eat on-the-run between meetings, teaching, etc., or I eat at my desk while responding to e-mail. Rather than bad time management (I'm fairly organised and efficient), this behaviour can be linked to the corporate university's emphasis on increasing productivity of its workers – and my own complicity in such a process. Pierotti (2002) has written about decreasing faculty morale under such corporatizing pressures, which resonates with how I feel every time I promise myself that I *will* take a break tomorrow, and don't. Moreover, stress among academics has been linked to serious physical and mental ill health (Kinman,1998).

14.00 to 16.00

I spent the early afternoon with three colleagues preparing for a fieldtrip the following week with primary school children (7-9 year olds) to Thornley Woods (half an hour from Newcastle). We drove out to the woods and walked around, planning fieldtrip activities and worksheets, and discussing the teaching we would do with the children in their school beforehand and at our university the day afterwards. Again, I undertook this work because it enthused me, because it was something new and exciting. In the event, working with the children was absolutely exhausting but a huge amount of fun and I learned a lot (for photos, see Askins, 2007b).

I won't repeat the earlier discussion about bridging across different learning environments, making the academy/geography relevant, etc. What I want to address here are related issues regarding equality of opportunity and 'widening participation'. Who accesses the modern university? Research shows that, while our student demographic has shifted over the past few decades, we still remain – in the UK at least – the preserve of the middle classes and above (see Higher Education Academy, 2008; Taylor, 2008). This is not only an economic issue:[5] there are social and cultural competencies involved in attending university and for many children/people, including most attending the school we were working with, academia is outside dominant life expectations (Dillon, 2007; Thomas, 2006). Introducing university *as a possibility* requires working across/in different places: widening participation requires labour, requires positive action. While there are some examples of good practice, these appear to be the exception rather than the rule, with universities keen on rhetoric but short on committing resources. What individual academics may achieve with small projects such as ours is not going to challenge the endemic inequalities around accessing university.

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5   Though neoliberalist principles threaten any endeavour to 'widen participation' with ever-increasing fees and other costs associated with studying for a degree.

16.00 to 16.30

Back in my office I hurriedly dealt with as many e-mails as I could. I experience technology as simultaneously transformative and entrapping, even as it opens up possibilities and improves equality of access in many ways, it structures us and creates exclusions – see *Workplace* (2002) for a critical discussion on the complexities of technology within academia.

16.30 to 17.30

Next, a meeting with an undergraduate student to discuss her plans for upcoming dissertation fieldwork over the summer months. I am also guidance tutor for this student, who had a baby at the end of first year, and we inevitably talk about a variety of issues whenever we meet. There is rich debate among feminist academics regarding the part that we, as individuals, play in all our academic endeavours and the need to excavate and hold central those individual, personal lived experiences and 'situated knowledges' (e.g. Bondi, 2002) – the need to reflexively examine the ways in which we *are positioned and position ourselves* in a variety of contexts, recognising the inseparability of consciousness and embodied experiences, and how these subjectivities are caught up with a 'politics of position'. I could have written about 'positionality' with regard to any/every part of this 'day in the life' and I would argue it is implicitly there between the lines. I raise it here because, while attention is paid to positionality with regards to research and writing, these issues are less often translated within guidance and support roles. I have a duty of care and, moreover, should bring an 'ethics of care' (after Thrift, 2003) to all engagements with students (and colleagues too!).

I gave birth to my eldest son while an undergraduate student, a key reason that this student transferred from her original guidance tutor to me, and the reason for the time and energy I dedicate to supporting this student (and another young woman who had a baby in her second year). I'm not arguing that someone without the same experience of childbirth/childcare as a student cannot support anyone else in that situation, nor am I advancing any essentialised argument rooted in gender identity, but rather I want to highlight that within our working days there are emotional and emotive moments and geographies that ever-complicate what we do – and what universities are. The unknowability and surprise of emotional encounters within the academy have the potential to enthuse and exhaust (often at the same time), and for me it is this very *humanity* that underpins whatever the role/s of the modern university may be.

17.30 to 18.30

Finally (?!) I continued editing a paper that had been accepted for publication subject to minor revisions (Askins, 2007a). See how I referenced myself there? Important to get my citations up, given how we are generally 'assessed' on our 'performance' by structures of the academy. I've run out of word limit here (which raises issues regarding the ways in which our writing is almost always corralled by structures/traditions of journal design/length/format/etc.) and I haven't even touched upon 'accountability' –

see Sparkes (2007) for a start, and presumably such issues are discussed elsewhere in this issue.

I'll just briefly say that demands for 'output' are difficult to deliver in a lectureship without research leave/sabbaticals and minimal 'research activity time' – I grab an hour or two here and there, sporadically, and I find it difficult to write-on-demand in such a way. Indeed, such demands threaten (rely on?) an 'extensification' and 'overflowing' of work into other spaces and times (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). While flexible spatialities and temporalities of work are part of life in the 21st century generally, and may be positive, there is an unspoken expectation that academics put in 'additional hours' above those contracted, which links to new structures of governance pervasive within neoliberal societies. And I'm privileged, I have a permanent contract: how much more difficult is research/writing for colleagues on pernicious short term/hourly contracts favoured within corporatized academia?

18.30

I went home to my family, tired but happy.

So what does it all mean?

What I've tried to offer here is a snapshot of my personal situation, in order to examine just some of the issues I feel are important when debating 'the role of the modern university'. I hesitate to offer any definitive statement regarding academia's function, and there are many issues I haven't touched on. This narrative is intended to argue that, for me, it is less a question of whether the University has any *pre-determined* function, but rather that we need to pay attention to which functions/roles are played out *through our everyday enactments as academics* – embodied acts both in and beyond the University that are situated in complex political networks involving personal, institutional, economic and social power relations.

My personal concern surrounds the paradox regarding being a 'socially-driven' academic. I took on the roles outlined above because I *believed* in them, I believed that in some small way each of these tasks held the potential to work towards social justice and exploited my own labour in the process. If, as I believe it does, the contemporary University depends on our critical motivation – vocation? – to deliver 'social goods', then how can we get *beyond* corporatization within the academy? Perhaps heeding Moten and Harney's (2004: 103) call to 'steal' from the University, to fall 'out of love' with the University, to be part of an uncanny undercommons is the way forward. They argue that this requires:

> a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood.

I remain in turn demoralised and hopeful, fearful and fascinated to see what next Midsummer's Day – what every day – will entail.

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