Deserting academia: Quitting as infrapolitics

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abstract

‘Quit Lit’ is a genre of confessional blog posts that outline why many academics abandon academia. Drawing on sympathetic readings of these testimonies, this note argues that quitting can be understood as what James C. Scott labels ‘desertion’. Desertion is the covert twin to mutiny. Rather than stay and openly protest to improve conditions, the deserter steps quietly away, resolving their situation through exit. Having deserted academia in this way, Quit Lit testimonies are then written from a space beyond sanction where the author is freer to reveal their experiences of the ivory tower – meaning that these testimonies are a resource for those studying workplace resistance. I begin by examining Quit Lit in more detail before outlining Scott’s work on convert resistance – what he labels ‘infrapolitics’. I discuss his theoretical framework before focusing on desertion as an infrapolitical act. Having done so, I outline some methodological concerns related to infrapolitical theory, arguing that Quit Lit offers an additional way to access the covert space away from the dominant where actors can express their feelings more openly. I then focus briefly upon temporary academics whose contracts expire and chose to leave the profession. I conclude by highlighting both the many voices missing from Quit Lit testimonies and the need to create a sustainable and nurturing academy.

Introduction

The summer before embarking on my PhD study, I read Francesca Coin’s research note ‘On quitting’ (2017) with morbid fascination. Work and activism
meant that I was aware of some of the issues academics faced before I returned to formal study. I knew that staff had struck that year over changes to their pension scheme, a dispute unofficially fuelled by:

... a long list of other issues including: precarity, pay (and the gender pay gap), institutional sexism and racism, workload modelling that bears little if any relationship to reality, stress and bullying, the pointlessness of REF (a way of comparing research outputs) and TEF (the teaching version), the attempt to make academics act like border officials, racist policies like Prevent, and so on. (Woodcock, 2018)

Put that way, academia didn’t sound like an entirely positive a career move. As someone who could only envision themselves in the ivory tower thanks to a transformative experience of trade union education, I brought a lot of baggage to the academic environment. Was a PhD really the right choice for someone like me? Was my success at Ruskin College, studying on the only Masters course of its kind in the UK, largely down to its unique approach (Manborde, 2019)? After a period as an associate scholar, I talked it through endlessly and fretted at length about applying.

Eventually, tentatively, I settled on returning to study. I then I stumbled across Coin’s note and found out that a whole genre of blogging existed purely to outline how damaging academic labour can be and I went back to wondering: is this really what people like me do with their lives?

**Quit Lit**

‘Quit Lit’ is ‘a new genre of literature made up of columns and op-eds detailing the reasons why scholars – with or without tenure – leave academia’ (Coin, 2017: 707). These blog testimonies outline the reasons why academics abandon an increasingly neoliberal university. Once I decided that it was better to go into the academy with my eyes firmly open, I was open to the idea that for students of worker resistance, Quit Lit is actually a resource. Unlike others staring down binary love-it-or-leave-it rhetorical questions (Taylor, 2013: 853), these academics actually left. However we may feel about that, these are the stories of workers who, pushed to a limit, say no (Coin, 2017: 714-715). What do their testimonies tell us? This essay then is an attempt to
expand upon this realisation, as well as a plucky attempt to look at my always-muddled future with a steely gaze.

**Saying no**

For Coin, exit from academia represents ‘a sense of powerlessness before the growing demands of neoliberal academia’, a ‘weakness before the invasive demands of market competition’. But it is also ‘an attempt to interrupt the neoliberal discourse’; a ‘desire to rebel against its values’ (Coin, 2017: 707) by saying no. Exit means crossing a barrier – in Camus’ terms, a ‘borderline’ or a Foucaultian ‘uprooting’ (ibid.: 714-715). The potential damage from staying within academia forces a response, wrenching the actor over a symbolic line into refusal-as-exit.

Coin’s reading can be placed at one end of a continuum (Dunkles, 2017; Goldin, 2018; Loussikian, 2016) in opposition to explorations of why academics shouldn’t quit (Morris, 2015; Toly, 2015). This opposition sometimes bleeds into outright condemnation – including describing Quit Lit as ‘Why didn’t anyone tell me unicorns don’t exist? essay[s]’ (Campbell, 2015).

For me though, exit in Coin’s sympathetic reading is comparable to desertion; incompatible with the status-quo, finally forsaking systemic change, the actor disappears beyond the reach of power. It is choosing exit over voice. This observation is my starting point for understanding quitting as what James C. Scott labelled ‘infrapolitics’. Simply put, infrapolitical acts such as these improve the position of the actor without challenging the dominant authority. Instead of costly open confrontation, a successful infrapolitical act is like an infrared wave, existing beyond the spectrum of what is seen and invisible to the powerful (Scott, 1990: 183-184). They are hidden challenges to domination, acts of resistance that seek to achieve covertly what under more favourable circumstances would be achieved openly.

**Understanding infrapolitics**

Scott outlines infrapolitics in *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (1990). This text is inspired by observations made during the
ethnographic research that underpinned his previous empirical study. This experience attuned Scott to understanding that poor villagers behaved differently around the wealthy out of fear of the consequences of voicing their opinions imprudently (ibid.: ix-x). *Domination*... is a theoretical exploration of this understanding, a ‘dialectical and dynamic theory of interpersonal and intergroup power relations’ (Sivaramakrishnan, 2005: 324).

Infrapolitics exists within and is nurtured by what Scott labels the ‘hidden transcript’. This exists in contrast to the ‘public transcript’. Scott’s theory is complex, drawing on a range of social theorists from Foucault to Habermas, Bourdieu and Jameson (Scott, 1990: xv) – but I’ll outline a working sketch of these concepts to illustrate the discussion.

The public transcript can be understood as ‘a short-hand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate’. This ‘public performance’ (ibid.: 2) is inline with how the dominant – in this case, those more powerful in the university than the deserting academic – ‘wish to have things appear’ (ibid.: 4). It is a product of domination, an often ‘stereotyped, ritualistic’ (ibid.: 3) presentation created for when presenting true feelings would be detrimental. This is not to say that the dominant are open in their contribution to the public transcript as they ‘often have much to conceal’ (ibid.: 12). But interaction between the dominant and subordinates is largely – although never entirely (ibid.: 4) – defined by the wishes of the former over the preferences of the latter. It is:

...the *self* portrait of dominant elites... [a] highly partisan and partial narrative... designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalise... to conceal or euthanize the dirty linen of their rule. *(ibid.: 18)*

The public transcript is the outcome of on-going, constant struggle *(ibid.: 14)*. Despite this, it presents a view that is relatively free of conflict. Rather, subordinates will attempt to covertly subvert the power relation without forcing a response whilst the dominant judge how far this can be allowed to continue whilst still maintaining an image of control.

The public transcript might be the meeting between the academic and their manager in which they bite their lip and tell the boss what they want to hear rather than how close they are to walking away. Conversely, the hidden
transcript might be the conversation that the academic has with friends in the pub about how shit their job is and how much they want to quit. It can be understood as a space away from the view of the dominant – ‘a privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse’ (*ibid.*: 25). The hidden transcript, created in response to domination, is limited to physical locations away from the ‘direct observation of power holders’ (*ibid.*: 4) and shared only between specific actors (*ibid.*: 14). It can be conceived as an ‘off-stage’ space, where discourse and action are ‘produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript’ (*ibid.*: 4–5).

If the public transcript is largely what the dominant want to hear, the hidden transcript is closer to expressing how actors really feel, typically articulated amongst trusted companions and safe from the consequences of being overheard. It is a ‘collective cultural product’ (*ibid.*: 9) reflecting the relations of power. Many Quit Lit testimonies suggest that academics have access to confidants with whom they can share their concerns beyond their managers’ earshot. There are arguably examples of these hidden transcripts both within (Anonymous Academic, 2014; Doctor Outta Here, 2012; Lindsay, 2018; Maren Wood, 2013) and outside of academia (drbillyo, 2013; Hocutt, 2014; Larson, 2013; nicoleandmaggie, 2014; Peterson, 2014).

Finally, infrapolitics can be understood as ‘the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups’ (Scott, 1990: 183). These struggles remain hidden from the dominant in order avoid recrimination. This is the ‘infra-red’ already described – the ‘invisible act’ (*ibid.*: 183). But it is also the ‘infra’ of ‘infra-structure,’ the foundation what one day might become open politics (*ibid.*: 184). In this way the hidden transcript is a ‘condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it’ (*ibid.*: 191). It is resistance as guerrilla war (*ibid.*: 192), forever pushing the boundaries of what is possible without provoking a punitive response.

This is in opposition to ‘safety valve’ theories where the same low-level transgressions work to stop dissent spilling over into something more serious (*ibid.*: 184–192). Contu’s (2008) ‘decaf’ resistance is arguably a sophisticated variation of this. Here discursive acts that Scott would consider foundational are understood as falling short of the benchmark of disrupting – rather than
parodying or otherwise subverting – the ‘sociosymbolic network’ (ibid.: 374) and are therefore discounted as ultimately pleasurable but risk-free gestures.

**Mutiny and desertion**

For Scott ‘each of the forms of disguised resistance... is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance’ (1990: 199); overt politics has an infrapolitical equivalent. Instead of challenging material appropriation through land invasions, this might mean squatting; rather than challenging ideological dominance with public counter-ideologies, the slaves and peasants Scott draws heavily upon might respond with subversive folk tales. Although Collinson in ‘Strategies of resistance: Power, knowledge and subjectivity in the workplace’ is critical of the rational, ‘authentic’ resistant actor that underpins Scott’s model (Collinson, 1994: 53-56), to the challenges to ideological, material and status appropriation outlined in Domination..., we might add the control and appropriation of knowledge considered of value within the organisation (ibid.: 30).

In this overt/covert schematic, desertion is mutiny’s infrapolitical twin (Scott, 2012: 11). Here etymology is revealing. ‘Mutiny’ draws upon the Middle French *meute* meaning ‘a revolt, movement’; ‘desertion’ from Late Latin *desertionem*, meaning ‘a forsaking, abandoning.’¹ The mutineer risks reprisals to speak truth to power; the deserter eventually gives up on change and solving their own problem, slips safely away. Desertion ‘makes no public claims, it issues no manifestoes; it is exit rather than voice’ (ibid.: 10). This formulation is in clear opposition to demands that academics stay to make things better (Little, 2015) – but without in turn embracing a reactionary position. Instead, I understand desertion in a way Boldt might approve of when he asserts:

> I’ve heard so many tales from people who feel victimized by the academy that I can’t help but feel a twinge of excitement when someone escapes an exploitative situation. (2014)

Reading resistance – a methodology

E.P. Thompson had such a profound influence on Scott’s early thought that he can recall the chair he sat in when he read *The making of the English working class* (Cerezales et al., 2013). Likewise, I remember perching on an old chair rescued from a derelict office, reading *Domination*... whilst working on my Masters thesis and *feeling* as much as thinking: there’s something ‘right’ in what Scott argues. Perhaps this emotional response is what’s needed to maintain a sustained relationship with an author’s canon. Certainly, I’ve been fascinated by Scott’s writing ever since and, having run like a backbone through my MA research, he forms a starting point for of my PhD.

This is not to argue that infrapolitical theory can be applied directly to contemporary organisations, despite taking inspiration from workplace relations (Scott, 1990: 20–23). Most of the examples of domination that Scott draws upon are horrifically more brutal than these contemporary cases – and that’s before factoring in that deserting academics remain relatively privileged workers. Rather, *Domination*... presents a captivating but problematic map that orientates me towards particular questions, concepts and considerations.

One key issue that infrapolitical theory presents is methodological: how can I access the hidden transcript? Without this access, it is difficult to understand the emotions and actions of the dominated. Fortunately, there are creative ways for researchers to access hidden transcripts. These include, as I did in my Masters thesis, studying cases of infrapolitics forced calamitously into public view; understanding interviews as taking place within the hidden transcript at an ‘off-stage social site’ (Anderson, 2008: 257); curating focus groups that could be read as simulating a similarly ‘off-stage’ context (Stroebaek, 2013); and undertaking ethnographic research of the kind that allows access to the working lives of the dominated (Kaminer, 2018).

Quit Lit testimonies present another way to resolve this methodological concern. Quit Lit is a public narrative, a testimony that for Coin, ‘transfer[s] quitting into a political process’ (2017: 707). As Dunn highlights, Quit Lit ‘demonstrates that saying goodbye is becoming an increasingly public act’ (2013) – but a key feature is that this ‘goodbye’ is no longer an ‘insider’
account. Written from outside of academia, the testimony appears once the deserter is beyond sanction from the employment institution. Thus desertion only becomes a political narrative once it is safe to do so. In this way, quitting can be understood as passing through a metaphorical gateway to a space beyond harm.

After all, the ‘escape’ Boldt (2014) mentions is not an invisible act – *but it can be a disguised act*. How many deserters are open about their feelings and experiences until they are long gone? What crossover is there in content between Quit Lit testimonies and resignation letters? How many deserters confess why they’re leaving academia in face-to-face confrontation with authority? As Tindall outlines:

...how much of your reputation do you want to risk in resigning? Among the questions to ponder before you start writing any resignation letter: Do you really want to burn bridges? (2016)

A decent reference is still useful even when plotting a career change.

Scott argues that it can be inferred from the practice of mass poaching that secret discourses away from the powerful were a crucial part for sustaining a mass wave of disobedient acts (1990: 190). The Quit Lit testimony can be understood as a similarly visible act of resistance but one where the dominated are no longer protected by anonymity or deniability (*ibid.*: 139) but through moving beyond reach of sanction. Given the testimony can provide context for and description of desertion then it is insightful to echo this process of inferring, to use the testimony to look back at the deserters’ experiences prior to exit.

This is the process I undertook as part of drafting this essay, which is empirically underpinned by 50 Quit Lit testimonies from academics working in the USA and the UK. This dataset initially drew upon a Google Doc spreadsheet curated by Chronicle Vitae that signposted to testimonies; further examples were then identified by searching online. Seeking testimonies from 2015–2018 absent from this spreadsheet, I included any that appeared in the top 20 search results by year generated using the terms ‘Quit Lit Academic’; although somewhat arbitrary, search engines at least reveal the most popular material first. This larger dataset was then analytically filtered.
Criteria for inclusion were that the academic had quit after 2007; the testimony could be reduced to a single post, even where the author had written extensively; and the deserter had actually quit mainstream academic work rather than simply taken a break. This dataset was subjected to top down thematic analysis using apriori codes relating to desertion and infrapolitics (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Put another way, coming to understand Quit Lit as the end point of a process that can be ‘inferred’ backwards invited me to build upon my initial observation of Quit-Lit-as-resource and ask: what is revealed through coding a Quit Lit dataset for themes that draw on concepts found in Scott’s work?

**Quietly stepping away**

One observation prompted by thematic coding is that for some academics on temporary contracts, there are seemingly limited structural opportunities to impulsively ‘mutiny’. Here desertion might mean walking away after failing to achieve a goal or a gradual transition where the deserter slowly drifts into other activities. Contracts are allowed to expire or are not secured and exit becomes permanent.

For example, keen to be closer to her mother, Lord had accepted a visiting professorship 40 miles from home, a backwards step in terms of career progression:

> The job had an expiration date, but so did I. When that date came, I changed careers, left academe, and moved to Washington, D.C., to live in an area I had always wanted to live. (Lord, 2012)

Rader meanwhile came to slow conclusion that his career wasn’t going to be as successful as he hoped:

> I wish I could say that my departure was a dramatic and righteous micdrop. Really my departure was a slow fizzle... It started to dawn on me around 4 years out that I might have passed my sell-by date... In my final year on the market... I had only one interview. And I’m not working there now. (Rader, 2017)

Walking away can involve missing self-imposed deadlines for achieving career benchmarks. Here there is a sense of a target not met, a deadline too personally costly to ignore:
That afternoon I hit the brick wall. I had spent three years on the academic job market and felt further away than ever from my goal. Was I to work yet another year as an adjunct, scraping by, with no promise that the next year would be any better than the previous three? (Maren Wood, 2013)

...I got an email telling me my last (and best) hope for a tenure-track job this year had evaporated. I’d promised myself that this would be my last year on the market. Now, I’d promised myself that last year, and I’d decided to try again, but this time, I knew it was over. (Bartram, 2018)

These cases highlight how desertion, whilst emotionally complex, is for some academics structured in a way that potentially minimises confrontation. There is the opportunity to quietly step away from a damaging situation.

These testimonies foreground that it is never just a particular employment relationship that is exited; for precarious academics, contracts are finite and exit arguably viewed mutually as an inevitability, pushing the limits of desertion as a metaphor. Here a second more fundamental desertion takes precedence – desertion from the profession. Rather than seeking reemployment, the deserter exits the occupation and therefore avoids enduring further mainstream academic labour.

Again, Quit Lit might be understood as an attempt to turn this muted exit into a resistant one having reached a position of safety, belatedly ensuring the meaning of the exit is clear through ‘making a spectacle’ and/or demonstrating solidarity with those left behind (Kirkpatrick, 2019: 136). The need to accept domination and suppress the resultant anger is effectively removed. Beyond sanction, the deserter might now demand a cathartic public satisfaction for past experiences (Scott, 1990: 213-215).

A positive ending?

I read a lot of Quit Lit in drafting this essay. My head spinning from the testimonies of heartbroken academics, it was helpful to remember that there are many other voices missing from this study. To what degree is Quit Lit shaped by genre conventions and what do these conventions omit from – or over-emphasize within – the testimonies? And what about those leaving academia who don’t write Quit Lit? Why do they choose not to publish their narratives? What about those, like Coin herself, who stay within academia?
What are the factors, beyond economic coercion, that differentiate between those who desert and those who stay? What else keeps academics within the ivory tower?

There is a parallel task to analyse the testimonies of academics struggling—but-managing to nurture a progressive pedagogy (e.g. Askins, 2008) and to survive in hostile conditions (e.g. Robinson, Ratle and Bristow, 2017). I am grateful that others are undertaking this work, not least because I was lucky enough as a student to benefit from a decidedly progressive educational environment. Before its tragic demise (Ledwith, 2017), the Masters in International Labour and Trade Union Studies at Ruskin College adopted a consciously Freireian approach. My lecturers attempted to create a space where activists and organisers could support each other with the project of trade union renewal and the ‘hidden injuries’ that result (Manborde, 2019). This experience was genuinely life-changing. It is this gift that underlines for me the importance of continuing to ask how a progressive approach to higher education is nurtured and protected – and how future deserting academics might instead sustain a home here.

references


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