



Hope, Rigging and Relativisations in the Making of Neoliberal Academia

By
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Abstract

It is hardly news that neoliberal academia, to say the least, might not be the very best place for conducting critical research. Among the scholars with a critical bent, this is such a widely accepted fact that it basically constitutes a truism. However, it is one thing to say that contemporary academia is hostile to critical scholarship, but quite another to understand mechanisms pertaining to such a state of affairs. With the aim of illuminating the performativity of neoliberal academia, the article first examines how neoliberalism engages academic subjectivity, making it apparent that it is our hope of establishing a decent academic career at some point in the future that fosters the excessiveness of neoliberal academia. Second, by focusing on the practice of rigging academic positions, where job advertisements effectively serve as nothing but a facade for employing preselected candidates, the article reminds us that neoliberal academia is not at all foreign to sidestepping competitiveness. Third, while emphasising the importance of questioning the (in) existence of critical thinking in contemporary society, I analyse some viewpoints in academia that relativise the rigging of academic positions and the lack of critical scholarship in neoliberal academia.

Keywords: academia; hope; neoliberalism; rigging; performativity

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Introduction

In *All Gall Is Divided*, Emil Cioran recalls the conversation between his then academically driven self and a supervisor eager to discipline his zeal:

At the age when, for lack of experience, one takes to philosophy, I determined to write a thesis like everyone else. What subject to choose? I wanted one that would be both familiar and unwonted. The moment I imagined I had found it, I hastened to announce my discovery to my professor.

“What would you think of *A General Theory of Tears*? I feel ready to start work on that.”

“Possibly,” he said, “but you’ll have your work cut out, finding a bibliography.”

“That doesn’t matter so much. All History will afford me its authority,” I replied in a tone of triumphant impertinence.

But when, in his impatience, he shot me a glance of disdain, I resolved then and there to murder *the disciple* in myself. (2019: 38)

Since this resolution, Cioran also resolved to abandon the notions of General Theory, History, Philosophy and other grand designs that have proven to be so incredibly efficient in disciplining our existence. He did not quit academia straightaway, though. Instead, as he summons up, he (ab)used it to arrive in Paris and make ends meet for a few years: “I had come here on a grant for several years from the French government to do a thesis, from 1937 until the war, till 1940, a thesis in philosophy...Certainly not! I never went to the Sorbonne, I lied” (Cioran in Cioran & Weiss 1986: 110). Cioran succeeded in maintaining his existence in a similar fashion, that is without having a regular job, basically for his entire life. And he took great pride in evading the existence of a disciple:

I only practiced a profession for a year, when I was a high-school teacher in Rumania. But since, I’ve never practiced a profession and have lived like a sort of student. I consider this my greatest success, my life hasn’t been a failure because I succeeded in doing nothing. [...] I always found one scheme or another, I had grants, things like that. (ibid.: 114-115)

The result of Cioran's lifestyle, let us sidestep his ironic modesty above, is *not* nothing. Quite on the contrary, Cioran (2019, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) published several collections of aphorisms that remain immensely important for those of us who cherish the conviction that work in the humanities and social sciences should be about expressing rather than resolving our existence. However, the knowledge that is formulated in aphorisms has hardly any place in the university, even if those aphorisms happen to present the greatest success in expressing our existence, and Cioran was perfectly aware that "one doesn't become a professor with aphorisms" (in Thacker 2019: x). Soberly realising that "for a writer the university is death" (Cioran in Cioran & Weiss 1986: 119), he found his narrow space of freedom and productivity somewhere in-between grants, publishing and the old rent system of Paris that provided him with a cheap place to live, that is the apartment "for a ridiculous monthly rent" (Cioran in Cioran & Jakob 1994: 137), in which he pulled off to stay until his death. He was also fair enough to make it clear that "for the younger generation of today, all this is impossible" (*ibid.*), thus refusing to act surprised at the lack of original thinking.

The lack of original and, in particular, original critical thinking is thus not something that has just so happened. It is, rather, engrained in the performativity of neoliberal academia. Fully aware that it is beyond any written piece to provide the grand and all-inclusive portrayal of how contemporary academia has been constituted, the article will keep its aim modest and engage with 'only' a segment of its performativity in relation to the lack of critical thinking.

To begin with, the article will dwell at the productive conjunction of academia and neoliberal discourse. Sloterdijk's argument that the excessiveness of neoliberalism is maintained by the structure of postponement and indirect living that characterises our understanding of work will be situated in the broader context of neoliberal – and academic – self-entrepreneurial subjectivity. The article will proceed while taking care *not* to present academia as a place where only the most competitive spirits come together as a result of neoliberal emphasis on building our self-entrepreneurial capacities. While analysing neoliberal performativity, I fully acknowledge that "the normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as 'being' – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well" (Butler 2011: 140). Neoliberal academia does not establish itself merely by reiterating the discourse of competitiveness; it requires a particular constitutive outside. Neoliberal academia, in other words, requires exclusions. The article will exemplify this by highlighting a practice that has been relegated to the constitutive outside of neoliberal academia, namely the rigging of academic positions. 'Rigged,' in the context of recruitment processes in academia, just to be clear, means: "intended for a particular candidate from the very start" (Åmossa et al. 2018: 6). The corrupt practice of job rigging – which is, in actual

fact, a *neoliberal* systematic reversal of *neoliberal* emphasis on building our self-entrepreneurial capacities – excludes those whose critical capacities could endanger a smooth performativity of neoliberal academia. It, on the other hand, ensures that those who are recruited in academia will choose to engage with research interests other than those that would result in research that is critical of academia. Following this, the article will reflect on the two practices that we often come across among scholars nowadays, both of which are quite informal but effective in sidestepping critical thinking in neoliberal academia, namely undermining the importance of tackling academic job rigging and seeing all research interests as equally important. These practices have not materialised in academic publications, hence their informal quality, yet they structure contemporary academia which is what makes them a very important subject of critical inquiry. Acknowledging that there is not much that makes academia a particularly suitable host for critical research today – while not acting prescriptively – the article will conclude with a brief discussion on the possibilities of persisting with critical thinking, including the option of using project funding against its specified purpose and in order to advance critical scholarship.

Just One More Thing to Do and Then You Are Not Done

Horkheimer was spot-on when he said: “Freedom means not having to work” (in Adorno & Horkheimer 2011: 16). The vast majority of us unfortunately have to work in order to survive, so we try to find work that promises a relatively decent life. But, just as Sloterdijk noticed:

Before we “really live,” we always have just one more matter to attend to, just one more precondition to fulfill, just one more temporarily more important wish to satisfy, just one more account to settle. And with this just one more and one more and one more arises that structure of postponement and indirect living that keeps the system of excessive production going. The latter, of course, always knows how to present itself as an unconditionally “good end” that deludes us with its light as though it were a real goal but that whenever we approach it recedes once more into the distance. (2015: 194)

The problem thus lays not so much in the fact that we have to work but in the structure of postponement and indirect living that averts us from living. Sloterdijk is not merely saying that we work for the sake of working, thereby ignoring a much healthier understanding of work that is based on the idea that we work in order to live. In the final instance, it is true that we do work in order to live, however

we inadvertently end up perpetuating the structure of postponement and indirect living as we chase those work goals that would, once fulfilled, allow us to ‘really live.’ It is fundamental to note, as Sloterdijk did, that this structure is precisely what keeps the system of excessive production going or, in other words, what nourishes the excessiveness of neoliberalism. Diligently working and patiently waiting for the moment when all preconditions to ‘really live’ will have been met, we lead modest lives that, in actual fact, result in the excessiveness of our socio-economic system, namely neoliberalism.

Neoliberal academia provides us with a highly suitable institutional context for examining the structure of postponement and indirect living in contemporary society. Early career scholars are always just one more postdoc away, one more publication away or one more teaching gig away from reaching a permanent academic position that would allow them to ‘really live.’ Yet, as Tokumitsu claims, “tantalizing closeness is the hallmark of second-class labor: it affords workers a clear view of what could be, yet they remain relegated to the frustration zone of so-close-yet-so-far” (2015: 67). Scholars rarely see themselves as ‘workers’; as scholars, we are far more likely to see what we do as a calling and it is this sort of self-understanding that justifies enduring second-class labour on what we hope is our way to a permanent academic position that would enable us to make our calling into a life. What we often do not see is that “hope labor isn’t merely normalized, it’s institutionalized” (ibid.: 59) and that academia thrives on our – mostly unfulfilled – hopes of making it at some point in our academic future.

However, as Tokumitsu underscores, “some interns, adjuncts, and temps do ‘make it.’ If breaking through to the top tier were truly impossible, there would be nothing to fuel the hope of the bottom tier” (ibid.: 75). Certain hopes are fulfilled, to be sure, and it is indeed important not to oversimplify the industry of hope. But what is the meaning of ‘making it’ today? If ‘making it’ denotes securing an employment contract of indefinite duration, for example a postdoc securing a permanent academic position, then there are surely plenty of examples that would confirm this happening on a more or less regular basis. Then again I would not go as far as to say that those who ‘make it’ transcend the structure of postponement and indirect living; there are *always* further matters to attend to before we ‘really live.’ Anxiety does not end with landing a permanent job. In contrast to the idea(l) of ‘making it,’ neoliberalism does not welcome the practice of ‘making it’ and, if there is any permanency in neoliberalism, then it is the permanency of not ‘making it,’ of permanently and anxiously striving to achieve more and more in order to ‘make it.’¹ While their lives are radically different, the top tier and the bottom tier are situated at the same ideological plane. Hope springs eternal.

Neoliberalism owes its hegemony to its efficiency in mobilising our subjectivity and, with this in mind, Foucault highlighted that “neo-liberalism

is not Adam Smith; neo-liberalism is not market society; neo-liberalism is not the Gulag on the insidious scale of capitalism” (2008: 131). The most significant novelty of neoliberalism is to be found at the level of subjectivity, more precisely in the establishment of self-entrepreneurial subjectivity that has moulded in contrast to passivity of the liberal subject. Making herself ever more competitive, the neoliberal subject takes an active role and such a subject is, in Foucault’s words, “an entrepreneur of himself” (ibid.: 226). It is in this context that we also witness the birth of the neoliberal scholar, anxiously engaged in a wide array of activities – networking workshops, publishing, conferences, consulting gigs, etc. that promise at least a bit of progress in terms of her competitiveness. As she piously puts hope in reaching a decent life in the future while burning out at work, thereby fuelling the excessiveness of neoliberal academia, the neoliberal scholar is a hopeful subject. “Hope is such a powerful ideological tool because, cultivated in specific ways, it facilitates identification with exploitative forces rather than the assertion of one’s own interests” (Tokumitsu 2015: 60), but it seems to me that we are currently well-beyond the point of identification with exploitative forces. We are a self-exploitative force or, to put it differently, self-exploitation *is* the assertion of our own interests. We are neoliberalism, to be uncomfortably accurate.

In fact, things have taken such a curious course of events that we nowadays come across suggestions that academia might as well be seen as the role-model for the corporate culture of exploitation and not the other way round:

How to emulate the academic workplace and get people to work at a high level of intellectual and emotional intensity for fifty or sixty hours a week for bartenders’ wages or less? Is there any way we can get our employees to swoon over their desks, murmuring “I love what I do” in response to greater workloads and smaller paychecks? How can we get our workers to be like faculty and deny that they work at all? How can we adjust our corporate culture to resemble campus culture, so that our workforce will fall in love with their work too? (Bousquet in Tokumitsu 2014)

Self-exploitation thus effectively acts as a token of love, an expression of love towards what we do. This is not only to deny that what we do is work but also to recognise what we do as a calling that deserves our unconditional commitment. It would not be a great sign of predestination for an early career academic to start nit-picking about work culture, paychecks, workloads, etc., right? The neoliberal scholar is a true follower, working devotedly in hope that – at some point in the future – she will fulfil all those preconditions that would allow her to ‘really live’ her calling. Or, if the neoliberal scholar happens to suffer from critical thinking

and is aware that such a blissful point is not within our reach at all, in hope of progressing from second-class labour to what is akin to the first-class labour, namely securing a permanent academic position at a university.

Rigged Academia

Immersed in the study of neoliberal academia, one might easily but mistakenly conclude that all of those who have eventually secured permanent academic positions are the most competitive and diligent scholars out there, masters of the competition; neoliberal subjects *par excellence*. Things are not so simple and, when it is made apparent that a good number of those who have secured permanent jobs in academia did so by means other than those promoted by neoliberal discourse, the performativity of neoliberal academia receives a much-needed stick in the wheel.

On his blog *Finnish Syntax*, Dr Pauli Brattico shares a few telling experiences with his job-hunting in Finnish academia:

I once applied to a linguistics position in [a university in Finland], as they claimed to be looking for international scholarship. I have published my work mainly internationally. So were they?

An esteemed professor [at a university in Finland] stated in her report that international publications do not count as a merit because “Finnish linguists do not publish internationally, as the international community is not interested in our research.” Paradoxically, [the esteemed professor] had noticed that my papers *were* in international journals, but, in order to discount them as merit, forgot that they were, stating that nobody publishes there or is interested in the Finnish language outside our own borders.

This is as if you would consider articles published in *Nature* a dismerit, and only count papers published in a national *Psykologia-lehti*, and then rationalize this by saying that not many publish in *Nature*.

In fact, if you look at this evaluation as a whole, the situation was much worse. Not even publications in Finnish journals mattered; a person who was clearly most merited in terms of publications in Finnish linguistics journals was not awarded the job. His work was “somewhat retarded,” one esteemed reviewer, whose name I have long forgotten, pointed out. No explanation given or required. I was once judged by [a

professor at a university in Finland] as “not competent” in the domain of Finnish language studies, but with no explanation how this mysterious judgment was arrived at. The list goes on and on.

None of this is surprising, and the documents are only of entertainment value. Everybody understands that the *whole application procedure is a farce*. (Brattico 2017)²

So, if you publish your work internationally, and we are looking for international scholarship, we will tell you that we do not publish outside our own borders and the job is not for you. If you publish within our borders, then we will tell you that you are somewhat retarded and the job is not for you. True, the whole application procedure might as well be a farce, and your scholarship solely of entertainment value for us, but the job that would be a reward for your hard work – that we do recognise and, precisely because we do recognise it, we have to find a way *not* to take your job application any further – will nevertheless be given to someone else and there is not much you can do. It is our esteem that is at stake here. Life is not fair, sorry.

A few years ago, I came across an entry by Dr Michael Lewis (2019) at *Philosophy@Newcastle*, which is a blog written by staff and students in the Department of Philosophy at Newcastle University, advertising for a Lecturer in Philosophy. I was pleasantly surprised to see the following note accompanying the job opening: “I should stress that, unlike many, this position is genuinely open and undecided.” Dr Lewis, senior lecturer in Philosophy at Newcastle University (and, at the time, head of Philosophy), had decided to be genuine enough not to hide the fact that many advertised academic positions are, in truth, not openings. They are, rather, only traces of the closures. Not much more than depressing hangovers that come from academic rigging.

In “Rigging of Academic Positions in the Most Democratic Country in the World,” Jan P. Myklebust provides numerous telling cases from Sweden, among which are the next two:

In an op-ed in the major Swedish newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, entitled “Friendship corruption, and inbreeding at Swedish higher education institutions,” professors Mats Alvesson and Erik J. Olsson (2016) reported that 90 positions were contracted at the University of Gothenburg without complying with regulations, demonstrating a “culture of friendship corruption.”

In 2018 Tom Andersson posted an example on the Facebook group page, Högscoleleckän [Högskoläckan], from an announcement for a six-month investigator position at Linköping University that specifies: “Of particular merit is knowledge of and documented competence working on the project, Enhancing Individual, Organisational, and Societal Cooperation” and points out that participation in a specific project prejudices the search. (2020: 60)

These are not isolated cases and Myklebust also highlights the subsequent inquiry into the practice of academic job rigging in Sweden:

The investigation by the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers (SULF) was carried out at three faculties at Lund University, the social sciences faculty at Stockholm University, and the medical faculty at Uppsala University.

The findings show that “a majority of the recruitment positions have been arranged in such a way that it cannot be excluded that the results are decided upon beforehand” which means that the hiring process might be rigged. In 268 cases, the investigation found that:

57 percent of the positions were announced with fewer than three weeks to apply;

74 percent of the positions had fewer than five applicants; 37 percent only one;

49 percent of the positions have been filled within 20 days of the application deadline; 6 percent on the same day as the deadline;

73 percent of the positions were filled with an internal applicant. (ibid.: 57)

The SULF’s investigation caused quite a stir in Sweden (Myklebust 2020, 2019a, 2019b, 2018) as its authors brought the practice of academic job rigging not ‘only’ to the public but also academic eye.

However, these cases from Sweden, just as those from Finland and the United Kingdom above, are not offered in this article to imply that the existence of academic rigging is restricted to Finland, the United Kingdom and Sweden. If anything, one could expect this practice not to be as prevalent in one of the

most competitive academies worldwide, that UK academia surely is, or a country that is widely perceived as being among the least corrupt, namely Finland. Nor would one guess that it is flourishing in Sweden, a high-performing democracy. It would indeed be very nice to have access to data on the prevalence of academic job rigging worldwide. But, compared to happiness that has found its way to all sorts of indexes and colourful charts, including the World Happiness Report, academic job rigging seems to be one of those research interests that are rarely taken forward. Moreover, according to the aforementioned SULF report:

Suspected rigged calls for applicants are appealed relatively rarely. This is probably due to the fact that it is often known in the scientific circle that the position is intended for a particular candidate and that others do not wish to jeopardise their future opportunities for employment by getting a name as a troublemaker. (Åmossa et al. 2018: 3)

All this makes the exact magnitude of academic job rigging unknown, although there are clear indications that the rigging of academic positions is systematic rather than sporadic (Anonymous Academic 2014, Perlmutter 2015, Wojnicka 2018). There are but a few academic publications that, in part, deal with this topic in Europe (Altbach et al. 2015, Denisova-Schmidt 2020), which sadly reminds us that academia is largely unwilling to reflect on its own underbelly.

Furthermore, I appreciate that *the* academia does not exist and that there are academies that do not have much to do with neoliberalism but where corruption is in full bloom. It would nonetheless be all too easy to say that academic rigging is merely a deviation from the neoliberal ideal of competition and that we just need more neoliberalism to rectify this unorthodoxy. On the other hand, if it is acknowledged that the rigging of academic positions is a *neoliberal* systematic reversal of *neoliberal* emphasis on building our self-entrepreneurial capacities, we are faced with multifacetedness that marks the performativity of neoliberal academia and merits the following question: what is the constitutive outside of neoliberal academia?

In poststructuralist theory, constitutive outside is understood as what must be excluded to ensure the internal coherence of what is included (Butler 2011, Spivak 1990). The question above thus might as well be formulated: what must be excluded from neoliberal academia to ensure its internal coherence? When analysing the relation of inside and its constitutive outside, it should be acknowledged that

this latter domain is not the opposite of the former, for oppositions are, after all, part of intelligibility; the latter is the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own

impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside.
(Butler 2011: x)

There is surely something uncomfortable in the rigging of academic positions that relegates it to the constitutive outside of neoliberal academia; rigging exposes the hollowness of emphasis that neoliberal academia puts on a relentless competition, it haunts neoliberal academia and for that reason it must be excluded. It is not meant to enter the field of academic inquiry.

Exploring academic rigging is much-needed today as it gives us a glimpse in the constitutive outside of neoliberal academia. This is nonetheless made extremely difficult by, first, relativising the harmfulness of academic job rigging by emphasising the truism that merit is a social construct and, second, by proclaiming that all research interests are of equal relevance which, in turn, allows contemporary academia to relativise the importance of critical scholarship. Unwilling to confront its own corrupt practices, academia protects its name at the expense of critical thinking.

Relativisations of the Academic Mind

As argued in the SULF report:

The basic reason for designing an employment process so that only one person can be considered is, of course, that you are convinced that this person is best suited for the job. However, if that belief is genuine then it should not be necessary to manipulate the system. If it were the case, he/she should be able to get the job in competition. (Åmossa et al. 2018: 6)

Nevertheless, when the rigging of academic position is discussed and the importance of its prevention emphasised, I can already hear the objections of some academics along the lines of ‘but don’t you know that merit is a social construct? What does it, after all, mean to be “best suited for the job?” There are many empirically-based studies confirming that the indicators of merit are shaped by our social context. You should get yourself acquainted with the existing literature.’ I would not waste our time on this argument if it were not for the fact that it might deceive some decent people who still feel some sort of respect when faced with the confidence of pseudo-positivists. I fully respect everyone’s religious beliefs, including the belief in Science, but let us not get confused here: in the final instance, the objection above is all about justifying the rigging of academic positions. The invocation of scientific reasoning, in this context, is nothing but a

décor for rigged academia. It is surely true that merit is a social construct, then again that is a truism; everything in our society is a social construct, including our society. Social constructs are literally all that we have. I do appreciate that many studies are written in order to confirm the obvious, including the fact that merit is a social construct, yet that does not make the rigging of academic positions inevitable. What is important, however, is how we position ourselves in relation to our social constructs, which is yet another way of constructing our social constructs.

For example, if someone steals your wallet, you would likely refrain yourself from contemplating your wallet as a social construct and engaging in a quasi-Pyrrhonist exercise of passivity. Despite the fact that your wallet is certainly a social construct, I guess that you would name what happened to you a theft. Emphasising the truism that merit is a social construct when faced with a discussion on the rigging of academic positions is more often than not a rather cheap attempt at maintaining the face of those – and frequently by those – whose careers are a product of rigging in academia. This is surely not the same thing as stealing someone's wallet. It is much worse; rigging academic positions is stealing someone's career or, to put it more bluntly, existence.

The objection above, according to which the rigging of academic positions is basically considered to be inevitable as merit is a social construct, comes in many forms. One of its varieties, that I mention here as it is relevant for our discussion on neoliberal academia, is the objection that merit is nothing but a neoliberal fantasy and that we, as scholars critical of the status quo, should know better than to buy into neoliberal ideology. Quasi-positivism is here moved to the background of the objection. Make no mistake about it, though: one is always a step away from being informed that there are scientific studies showing that merit is a social construct and that, as the hegemonic discourse of our society is neoliberal, merit is a neoliberal construct. Which is, of course, both true and perfectly irrelevant. What is put forward in this version of the objection is, quite interestingly, a quasi-call for critical thinking. One is asked to be critical and reject the notion of merit as a neoliberal fantasy. The objection thus comes with a subversive appearance and I can see how it might impress those who are unacquainted with today's academia and still consider it to be the place where the life of the mind resides. However, let us not be confused by this apparent call for more critical thinking in the face of neoliberal ideology. There is nothing critical in justifying the rigging of academic positions and we should see through and expose such attempts at mystifying dishonesty in academia by hiding it behind neoliberal ideology. Critical thinking, if it is worthy of its name, must go beyond taking pride in its very own name. The status quo is most certainly not challenged by pretending that the status quo is

always perpetuated by some other people than those who exult in being critical of the status quo.

As mentioned earlier in this article, while they structure contemporary academia, relativisations of the academic mind have a fairly informal quality and, paradoxically, it is difficult to provide references that would prove their omnipresence. They have not really made it to academic publications as academia is not ready to admit the existence of rigging within its boundaries, let alone open up some space for discussing it. We can nonetheless spot these relativisations on question-and-answer threads, like those at *Reddit* or *Stack Exchange*, where we get to see lively discussions on the questions of this sort: “I know that there is a preselected candidate for a position to be filled at my department. What should I do?” (123happytree 2019) or “How to deal with systematic rigging of academic position job postings?” (Hjan 2020). This is also where we can read about the experiences of quite a peculiar kind, such as: “I suspect I might have participated in a rigged search, this time as a candidate!” (PeanutBusterChicken 2022). On the one hand, among the participants in these discussions, we see the disapproval of academic job rigging but, on the other hand, we come across all sorts of relativisations, for example:

The hiring process is unfair by nature because it cannot take into account individual life situations. (Kami in 123happytree 2019)

Based on many of the responses it seems that this ‘rigged’ faculty job postings are quite accepted in the academic community. And not really seen as something unethical. It is a way to deal with the formal requirements of ‘the system.’ And the formal requirements are a way to make the selection process *look* fair and objective. [...] If you want to report it, forget it. Nobody with authority or power against it really cares and many even support it. You can write a blog or a post on academia. stack exchange. The answers could be disappointing, but you will learn the truth. (Hjan 2020)

My sister was offered a post-doc but they had to advertise it before they could offer it to her officially. This happens in many other industries – it’s not unique to academia. They do it because they have to by law, not to mess people around on purpose. (Tiffy_hopkins in PeanutBusterChicken 2022)

Some of these ‘rigged’ searches end up hiring an outside person. I’ve seen it happen. (_fuzzbot_ in PeanutBusterChicken 2022)

Picking the seemingly best candidate based on a CV, work samples, and personal impressions from an interview within the course of a few weeks is simply not a reliable method to identify suitable (let alone the best) candidates, compared to hiring people who you've been in touch with for years. (O. R. Mapper in Hjan 2020)

Go to many conferences and make friends with as many powerful professors in your field as you can, one of them might like you and might make a 'rigged' job opening *for you*. (Nik in Hjan 2020)

Anonymity of the online environment, which allows for these opinions on academic job rigging to be aired in a hectic but free-spirited fashion, is not without its problems for the researcher. Most importantly, there is no way to know are the stories shared on these websites factual and one can only guess whether the discussants who present themselves as academics have an actual relation to academia. These obstacles, however, should not be used to disregard these sources, thus nurturing the spirit of relativisation in academia. The fact that discussions on academic job rigging take place at *Reddit* and *Stack Exchange* – started by PeanutBusterChicken, 123happytree and others – rather than in academic publications and conferences, should make us think about the state of critical research in academia.

Anyways, once that rigging has been construed as maybe a bit unfair to some but ultimately only normal, this corrupt practice, which supplies academia with a harmless and reliable cadre, becomes quite accepted. And there is hardly anything in academia that would disrupt this normalcy. The chances are that those who have been admitted to academia in this way are not going to bite the hand that has manipulated the recruitment process to get them in. They are likely to have different research interests. If it nonetheless happens that some of those who are already in academia start applying for funding with critical research, there are further relativisations that are here to protect the status quo in academia.

Funding is what makes many academic job openings possible, especially in neoliberal academia. For this reason, it is awarded with the utmost vigilance; funding is not to be given for critical research that unsettles the consensual universe of academia. This vigilance can be found in all sorts of unexpected places, for example behind the argument according to which every research interest is important and it is only a matter of how a researcher approaches what interests her. I have heard this one many times from the scholars in the humanities and social sciences who, by adopting what is only a seemingly radically democratic and inclusive attitude, strive to justify their research interests while being aware that what they study is both perfectly irrelevant and well-funded. I would like it

much better if they were just to say that they are doing their research for the sake of money, though I do understand that such honesty would not fare well against the idea of scientists as the diligent and humble tokens of Progress whose research is worth every penny of the public money. But, truth be told, the relevance of funded projects is rarely if ever questioned. It is basically assumed that their significance has been demonstrated by the often tedious process of applying for and, ultimately, securing funding. The process that typically includes preparing and submitting a detailed research proposal, budget, communication and dissemination measures, impact plan and other required documents that are meant to ensure that a researcher is approaching her research interest with a sufficient rigour or, in other words, that her research is carefully planned and, basically, worth the funder's money. The question of positivist and conformist ideology that stands behind the vast majority of funding bodies today – and is, what is crucial to note, instilled in the very forms that one must fill in order to successfully apply for funding – is largely put aside. I have examined the ideology of funding bodies elsewhere (Krce-Ivančić 2023, 2021a, 2021b), so I will restrain myself from going into this topic once again, however it should be noted that, once all research interests are seen as equally valuable, critical and non-critical research become equally valuable. Critical research can then be circumvented, and such a move presented as a personal choice that is just as valuable as conducting critical research. As long as it does not disturb the status quo, anything goes.

I am aware that there is no clear-cut difference between critical and non-critical research. Moreover, one would struggle to find a funding body that would not emphasise the importance of demonstrating critical thinking in a research proposal. The project that both proclaims itself to be critical and has just about nothing to do with critical thinking should no longer surprise anyone, let alone be seen as a paradox. As a rule, a funded project nowadays comes with the 'critical' tag. It is, without any doubt, important to keep on returning to the question: what is critical thinking? But, at the same time, continuously reconsidering the meaning of critical thinking should not debilitate us. It should, quite on the contrary, enable us to make a call and say whether a particular research project delivers a critical punch or not. There are no principles that ought to be followed when it comes to making such a call. It would be not only pointless but also counterproductive to try and set them out; what is critical in one context might as well be rather conformist in another context and *vice versa*. The importance of context, thus, should by no means be downplayed.

Somewhat paradoxically, we need critical thinking to recognise and promote critical thinking. There are certainly many difficulties in keeping critical thinking alive these days. There have always been many difficulties in keeping critical thinking alive in academia, to put it less nostalgically and more precisely. It is

also quite likely that critical thinking that structures a smooth career trajectory and does not demand much effort is not worthy of its name. Horkheimer already knew better than to yearn for those lost times of critical bliss that never happened:

Concerned thought, the longing for what is different, are part of critical truth, indeed, they are identical with it. But because truth and love have been unsettling and therefore dangerous since Christ and long before him, since there has been a society, access to teaching posts in philosophy, particularly at times such as the present, during periods of decline and a regression of the productive imagination, must be reserved for those who are harmless, authoritarian, cold, pedantic and reliable. In Europe, there are two factors that bring about this result: bad pay – only limited intellects take up such careers – and the vigilance of the departments. (1978: 217)

While the aversion to critical thinking is foundational to academia, it is nonetheless important for us to recognise and expose the obstacles to fostering critical thinking that are salient today, one of which is surely the reasoning that all research interests come with the same importance. All research interests are not of equal importance and we should make it apparent that the said reasoning, which might seem to be highly inclusive, is precisely what provides a good number of scholars, who could not care less about critical research, with an apparently noble excuse for excluding those research interests that are likely to be detrimental for obtaining funding but are vital for taking critical thinking forward. Alternatively, one is left with the impression that it just so happens that we are witnessing the proliferation of generously funded projects that have reached the unprecedented success in avoiding issues of the utmost importance for understanding our existence. Such reasoning does have further detrimental effects as it conveys the message that successful scholars are simply no longer interested in the field of critical theory, which tends to discourage those scholars who harbour such 'outmoded' research interests to apply for funding in the first place. The ultimate result is a rather smooth – and inclusive – exclusion of critical scholars from contemporary academia, and I could hardly think of a graver effect of treasuring the greatest respect for all research interests. There is thus no need to ban or even criticise those research interests that have a potential to challenge the status quo; giving them lots of love and respect, while being aware that the chances that such research interests will be taken forward in a funded project are next to zero, is far more efficient in dealing with the annoying persistence of critical thinking.

Conclusion

But, with such a state of affairs in mind, what could one do to foster critical thinking? There are no universally applicable solutions that this or any other article could propose. There nonetheless are well-funded projects in academia that take critical thinking forward nowadays and these should not be overlooked as we paint an accurately grim picture of contemporary academia. No system of exclusion is bulletproof. At the same time, the existence of such projects should not prevent us from confronting the fact that the projects and job openings that would welcome critical thinking are few and far between in current academia. We are largely dealing with the projects that contribute next to nothing in terms of developing our society's critical capacities and are perfectly fine with the status quo. More precisely, they are the status quo.

Cioran, who I mentioned at the beginning of this article, found a way to push his valuable ideas through, which included both coming to Paris with a grant from the French government to write a thesis at Sorbonne and doing exactly the opposite, that is not writing a thesis. Such a manoeuvre would be impossible today. Cioran understood his unique situation clearly and was dedicated to preserving his way of life:

I had to do everything I could, as one might put it, not to earn my living. Every form of humiliation is preferable to loss of freedom and that has always been, by the way, something like the program of my way of life. I had accommodated my way of life in Paris to this demand very well, although it didn't always work out just as I planned it. For example, I enrolled as a student at the Sorbonne for a year and could eat at the Mensa, until I was forty years old. When I turned forty, someone took me aside to tell me that there was an age limit of twenty-seven. (Cioran in Cioran & Jakob 1994: 136)

He did not earn his living, as one might put it, *but* he did produce a highly unique work that makes us reflect on our existence (Cioran 2019, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). This, *nota bene*, is precisely what academia should make possible. More often than not, however, academia discourages original and critical thinking. In any case, for a PhD candidate to eat at a subsidised university's canteen until her forties while not fulfilling any of her study obligations is nowadays largely unimaginable. Neoliberal academia, and society in general, has sealed such cracks that would allow us a more extensive freedom to create ideas that we are in dire need of today. We must look elsewhere.

There are researchers in neoliberal academia, the vast majority of which are postdocs, who work on funded projects that have nothing to do with critical

thinking, and often times their research interests in general, *but* they use the resources that a funded project provides them with in order to develop their own ideas that, in actual fact, have a lot to do with critical thinking. This strategy of keeping critical thinking alive within academia is, nevertheless, severely taxing. One has to fulfil the obligations that are a part of the funded project and, at the same time, fulfil her own goals or, in other words, self-obligations that result in a meaningful work. This often involves a massive amount of work that should be done and is, in all honesty, quite frustrating. The fact that one gets paid for not doing what she is best at and with what she contributes to our society the most is indeed frustrating. This frustration should not be glossed over as it indicates what should be changed in contemporary academia. However, this sort of trench warfare, where a critical scholar is temporarily sheltered from the unemployment by the grant money, might as well be what preserves critical thinking in academia nowadays. But it is gruelling, no doubt, in particular as the outcome of this struggle is rarely a permanent academic position that would finally enable our critical scholar in a conformist disguise to conduct her critical research in the open. More realistically, she could expect further fixed-term contracts, unemployment, lack of job opportunities coupled with the excess of rigged job openings and so on.

At last, we arrive at the possibility of leaving academia. This, however, does not mean leaving your critical being behind.³ If academia is not conducive to one's being, critical or not so critical, leaving it might as well be quite an emancipatory experience. Sara Ahmed produced *Complaint!* (2021), which I consider to be the fiercest critique of contemporary academia available, as an independent scholar without any funding. She also made it clear: "working as an independent scholar without access to institutional resources, I did not experience this situation as a lack, or only as a lack, but as an opportunity to conduct a project on my own terms" (Ahmed 2021: 11). Academia, therefore, is not necessary to produce critical work, even of the highest quality. It might as well be liberating to get your existence away from it. Money and time, at the same time, remain necessary for producing critical research; ideas, very literally, cost. Academia, as I have argued throughout this article, is not the most reliable source of time and money for critical thinking. Far more often than not, it rewards harmless and reliable spirits, acting as a safe haven for the conformist mind.

At this point, instead of seeing such a route as a betrayal of academia, which is what we frequently witness among those academics who consider themselves to be critical theorists, I would like to introduce some fresh air in our stuffy critical circles and show my full understanding or – why not? – endorsement for those scholars who are looking to make a shift to industry. And, yes, I would also like to carefully endorse those, sometimes too rosy, stories of a happy transition from academic to other careers, precisely as these make it apparent that it is possible to

leave academia and find your source of money, time and meaning in a myriad of other places (CBC Radio 2018, Polk n. d., Sobsey 2019). It should also be taken into account that so-called business values and a self-entrepreneurial mindset are today openly advocated in academia and it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that academia has widely become industry. In any case, the shift from academia to the world of business is not as categorical as it might seem at a glance. And, concerning the academics who consider those who have left academia in order to take a job in industry to be the traitors of the life of the mind, how about they tell us something about the practice of rigging academic positions that they have surely witnessed on quite a few occasions throughout their esteemed academic careers? Or about those excluded by such a practice and its effects on the quality of work that is conducted in academia? One can only laugh at their feigned obliviousness to the fact that it were the academics who betrayed the life of the critical mind in the first place.

I have no illusions that the world of industry is eager to welcome critical thinking of a sort that would be worthy of its name, yet hardly anyone expects that from industry. However, if it is true that the majority of serious critical thinking in academia is nowadays done by the scholars who manage to do this not strictly as a part of but in addition to their academic jobs, then I see no reason why would the scholars who are working in industry be incapable of furthering critical thinking outside academia, beyond or as a part of their jobs. That would unlikely be in the form of publications or conference papers as a decent amount of time is needed for such expressions of critical being. Then again, it is questionable whether these are the most suitable outlets for critical ideas to begin with. Critical thinking has fortunately always exceeded the limits of academia. Diogenes, among many others, had steered clear of the likes of Plato, laughing at the Academy. Many things, of course, have changed since Diogenes' time but it still holds true that being in academia is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for the flourishing of critical being. For those of us in academia, nevertheless, exposing and transcending its limits ought to be not just one of our equally valuable interests (that never gets taken forward) but our immediate responsibility.⁴

Author

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Endnotes

1 For my work on anxiety and constitution of the neoliberal subject, where I use psychoanalytic theory to extend Foucault’s conceptualisation of neoliberal governmentality, see Krce-Ivančić (2018).

2 As I have no evidence that would corroborate this blog post, I have decided to anonymise it. I have done that with a heavy heart as I believe that Dr Pauli Brattico’s *courage* of exposing other’s *cowardice* – with full names of the institutions and professors included – should *not* be relieved of its *critical* edge in any way.

3 The accounts of those who have decided to leave academia proliferate on the Internet. See, for example, “Quit Lit: The Vitae List,” a Google Sheet created by Chronicle Vitae (2014) that contains links to over eighty farewell letters to academia. There are very many reasons for leaving academia and one can learn a great deal about how neoliberal academia operates from these accounts of disillusioned scholars.

4 This article was submitted to *Culture Unbound* about a year ago. Back then, I was employed in academia – that, however, is currently not the case. A lot can change in a year, to be sure. Then again, more than a hundred years ago, Antun G. Matoš, a Croatian writer, referred to academics as “muzzled souls” (1990 [1909]: 196), and I am still looking for a more accurate description of my academic contemporaries.

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