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Compliance and contestation in the neoliberal university: reflecting on the identities of UK social scientists

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The UK higher education (HE) system, driven by the neoliberal project of successive governments, has seen significant reforms to its financing and structure in recent years. Designed to subject the sector more directly to the rigours of market competition, these reforms have prompted concerns about rising levels of student debt, a deterioration in the working conditions of academics, the replacement of traditional public sector values with a preoccupation with profitability and league table positioning, and the increased prevalence of corrupt practices. Although student and university staff protests against these reforms have been stronger and longer lasting than anticipated, and many social movements have formed around academia to challenge current transformations², these have not been very successful in impeding or reversing them. Furthermore, despite having produced a substantial critical literature on HE reform, UK social scientists do not seem to have been very effective in resisting HE neoliberalization, and in many cases could be said to be relatively compliant – even complicit – with the very measures critiqued in the literature.

This chapter discusses this seemingly puzzling contradiction. Searching for answers, we reflect on the changing working conditions and experiences of UK social scientists and

¹ The names of the authors are in alphabetical order. This is a fully co-authored chapter.

² These include the free and cooperative university movements, 'debt' movements, and the 'rethinking economics' movement.

consider their implications for the possibility of critical social science scholarship and action. In doing so, we hope to stimulate discussion about the potential relevance of the analysis in other European settings³. The working assumption is that understanding the potential contribution of critical social science depends upon understanding how the working conditions of social scientists shape both their capacity to act and the kinds of academic and civic virtues that are encouraged and valued. The chapter is based on a narrative analysis of 22 academic life histories conducted during 2014 and early 2015. However, before turning to that analysis, some contextual detail on the changing landscape of British HE is required.

The changing landscape of UK higher education

At the end of 2010 the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government decided to radically restructure funding for English universities.⁴ It was announced that by the 2014/2015 academic year, government funding for teaching would be discontinued for the disciplines of business, law, social sciences, arts, and humanities. For science, technology, engineering and mathematics – ‘teaching that cannot be covered by tuition fees alone’ (HEFCE 2015) – funding was reduced, but not terminated. To make up for the shortfall, the cap on student tuition fees was raised from £3375 to £9000 per year. The government predicted that most academic programmes

³ Parts of the UK picture are relatively distinctive. In particular, successive governments have made deliberate attempts to sideline critical voices in universities, deriding them as protecting public sector or producer interests, or as mindlessly oppositional in ways that suggest they should be ignored, defeated and dissolved.

⁴ Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland set their own HE policies and so the funding reforms discussed below were not implemented in these jurisdictions. However, many other restructurings – brought about by marketization – were implemented, often altering institutional structures and changing the conditions of academic work.

would not charge the £9000 cap, but a figure within the £6-7000 range. Despite this, by 2011 most universities announced that they would raise their fees to the £9000 maximum. In response, protests and university sit-ins were organized across the country, requesting that fee increases be reversed and government funding restored. For months thereafter, university fees, student debt, academic freedom and autonomy, and the role of universities in society took centre stage in public and academic debates. Nevertheless, the coalition government – under its budget-rebalancing and deficit reduction plans – moved forward with structural changes.⁵

Other changes, no less important, were concomitantly implemented. In 2012 the government opened the sector to privatization: on the one hand, by removing the cap on student numbers and allowing tuition fees to triple, they stimulated the ‘internal privatization’ of the sector (McGettigan 2013). On the other hand, by allowing the formation of new corporate institutional structures that made it much easier for ‘external’ money to enter the sector and extract profits, the government opened the sector to ‘external privatization’ and marketization.

By early 2014, tuition fees and student debt were not the sector’s only concern. Several universities had already discontinued academic programmes deemed to be ‘non-profitable’; made hundreds of academics redundant in the name of ‘efficiency savings’; introduced zero-hour contracts for many of their teaching staff, thereby casualizing academic work even further; renegotiated and reduced academic pensions; increased top

⁵ As analysts of HE finances made clear (McGettigan 2013), the government, by giving out £9000 ‘income contingent repayment loans’ to students and allowing universities to recruit as many students as they wished put in place a new system that in the short- and medium-term was more costly than before the funding decrease and was likely to prove more expensive in the long-term as well.

management salaries and bonuses; brought in consultancy firms to help restructure universities to be more ‘productive’; partially replaced university management with people from large corporations and/or US/Australian for-profit universities; began changing their governance and legal/corporate structures to enable more investment and borrowing; and embarked on large scale real-estate developments, to ‘improve the student experience’ and ‘provide value for money’⁶.

Suddenly, corporate practices that had previously been rare in the sector were being implemented at a dizzying pace. Universities were ‘disposing’ of whole programmes and departments by ‘selling’ (transferring) them to ‘competitors’⁷. Management at various universities searched for ‘buy-ups’ that would enhance their academic prestige and research and, according to some, prime location ‘real-estate portfolios’⁸. At the other end, the new private providers that entered the ‘market’ were allowed to enrol students receiving state financed tuition fees and maintenance loans. As a result, these newly created institutions expanded on a breathtaking scale, increasing initial student populations from a total of 6-10 to as many as several thousands in a matter of one or two years, sometimes by employing fraudulent practices⁹. Government officials – not

⁶ Universities UK, in its report, *Where Student Fees Go*, describes: ‘major capital investment[s] ... in what students say matter most to them, including state-of-the-art teaching facilities, additional staff, improved libraries and flexible and informal study areas where students can work in an environment that suits them.’ (2013:1,5)

⁷ For example, Middlesex University’s Philosophy programme was transferred to Kingston University, so Middlesex could focus its resources on developing branch-campuses overseas (McGettigan 2013).

⁸ One such high-profile example is the case of University College London and the Institute of Education: the two institutions ‘merged’ in 2014. UCL’s ‘acquisition’ of IoE meant that they now ‘managed’ a school of education, consistently ranked as first in the world by QS World University Rankings, and a large portfolio of buildings located in the middle of Bloomsbury, currently among the most valuable real estate in the world.

⁹ Fraudulent practices were exposed by investigative journalists, not by government oversight (The Guardian, 14 December 2014: *Thousands of ‘fake’ students at UK’s new higher education colleges*, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/dec/02/students-private-higher-education-colleges-taxpayer-subsidy-benefits-nao-loans>, Times Higher Education, 30 October 2014: *Uncontrolled expansion: how*

having proper regulatory and supervisory frameworks in place – ended up in the position of barely being able to influence how taxpayer money was used. Based on this, analysts argue that ‘as universities and colleges are forced to operate in commercial terrain, it is basic business imperatives that come to the fore. Our habits of thought about higher education are no longer appropriate for this new terrain’ (McGettigan 2013: ix).

However, given the diversity of institutional structures and conceptions of what universities are for, focusing only on the business and financial aspects would miss some of the important processes that structure British HE. As Ken Jones argues, to focus solely on policy or finances as the object of study ‘seems to overly privilege the actions and projects of government and of organizations that contribute supportively to its programmes – and, thus, *a priori* to decentre other social actors’ (2011: 210). Jones suggests focusing on ‘educational contestation’ and the range of social actors that participate in it, exploring ‘the intellectual and political resources with which they work’. In his view, such a focus might lead to a stronger understanding of the *politics* of educational policy making, and ‘the ways in which key decisions, strategies, projects, and achievements bear the marks of contestation, and express an orientation – perhaps accommodating, perhaps uncompromising – towards other actors and projects’. (2011: 211). Such a lens has the potential to illuminate the many ‘unintended’ consequences that have emerged in response to educational contestation following the 2010 policy changes, creating a complex web of networks of interests, new forms of institutional structures that reach well beyond mainstream academia, and new forms of

private colleges grew, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/uncontrolled-expansion-how-private-colleges-grew/2016579.article>, both accessed 2 September 2015).

cooperative/fragmenting labour practices and (global) social organizing that disrupt and alter initiatives of those in office. Yet, parallel to these developments, there is also a discourse of disillusionment and fatigue and a feeling of powerlessness within academia, reflecting what Jones describes as the “pattern of continuing but low-level and only sporadically organized discontent” in England, which is “increasingly at odds with the response to educational reform in other countries” (Jones 2011: 193). The research reported here represents an attempt to contribute to Jones’ project of ‘re-centring’ other social actors, with a specific focus on academics working in social science disciplines.

Analytic approach

As noted earlier, this chapter is based on a narrative analysis of 22 academic life histories¹⁰. Our analytical approach is influenced by Vieda Skultans (1997, 1998), who argues that similarities found in life histories revolving around similar events derive from both shared histories and ‘membership of a symbolic and textual community’ (1997:761). For Skultans’, ‘[n]arratives of lives bring together the past, present and future’ and, in her participants’ narratives,

coherence was constructed not only internally by the relationship of different elements of the narrative to each other, but also by relating the personal narrative to other shared narratives... In trying to make sense of their lives and

¹⁰ The interviews ranged between one and three hours, with the majority lasting 2-3 hours. We interviewed academics working in English and Scottish universities, but not Wales or Northern Ireland. In order to incorporate a wide range of academic life trajectories, we also interviewed academics who had moved abroad, and/or left academia altogether. The names of all our informants were changed. To further conceal identities we decided not to indicate the types of institutions where interviewees worked.

communicate them to others, narrators sought shelter for their life histories within widely shared literary traditions.

(Skultans 1997: 762, 765)

In our research, narratives of individual academic lives were constructed primarily as dialogues not grounded in broader literary traditions (although ‘campus novels’ and television series have had a long and popular history in depicting academic life in Britain¹¹), but rather in the shared narratives found in social science literature. To understand how social scientists’ strong criticism of HE reforms might co-exist with practices that comply with, and often support the very same policies they criticize, we use our data to interrogate disjunctures between these broader shared narratives and everyday academic practices, and the way such practices are recollected in the life history narratives.

Our approach is also informed by conceptual lenses drawn from work that, like Jones’s, takes a ‘bottom up’ approach to policy analysis by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of social actors whose voices tend to be marginalised in top-down accounts of political and social change, in particular the work of Wacquant (2012, 2013) on ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, Stef Jansen (2014) on statecraft, and Harms (2011) on the strategic mobilisation of binary discourse in everyday political acts. We begin by relating a widespread ‘simple story’ about shifting academic identities and virtues that circulates within broader social science narratives about HE policy change, showing how it is also evident within the narratives of our participants. We then go on to use our

¹¹ For a discussion of campus novels and their film adaptations see Moseley (2007).

data to highlight some of the inadequacies of this ‘simple story’. In the final section of the chapter, we explicitly problematize, and use our data to try to explain, the relatively diffuse and fragmented nature of organised opposition to the neoliberalization of HE amongst UK academics.

The ‘simple story’

A ‘simple story’ found in widespread critiques of managerialism and marketisation in HE, including our own previous accounts¹², is one of the erosion of traditional and the emergence of new academic identities and virtues. In a nutshell, the story is one of dispositions of collegiality and the disinterested pursuit of truth being *replaced* by dispositions of entrepreneurialism and an orientation towards social impact/public relations. These accounts are frequently couched in a neo-Foucauldian language of governmentality, academic self-regulation and subjectification. In what follows we do not suggest the story is wrong, only that it is simple. There is no doubt that there have been major changes to the HE sector - with implications for what counts as valued identities and dispositions – including: the erosion of the very idea of the public sector and service, the corporatization of universities, the fostering of institutional competition, the increased salience of the branding of institutions and of units and individuals, and sustained pressures towards cost effectiveness and auditability, leading to increased bureaucracy and use of technologies, the intensification of labour and the reduced salience of face-to-face or local relationships.

¹² E.g. see Cribb and Gewirtz (2013).

The ‘simple story’ also points to an important change in the relationship between universities and governments – 30 years ago students and staff, including Vice Chancellors, joined together to protest against cuts to HE funding. There is very little evidence of this in recent years, and further, there has been a very conspicuous strengthening of the alliance between senior university managers and official government policies and discourses. 30 years ago the academic as critically subversive of the government was a legitimized academic identity within the university. Now such an identity is increasingly incompatible with being a good employee. However, this simple story needs qualification and elaboration, and we will turn to this in the next part of this chapter. But before doing so, in what follows, we will use some extracts from our interviews to illustrate how elements of this simple story were evident – and frequently mobilized - in our life history narratives.

Quite often these narrative ‘recollections’ of the past revolve around and are coupled with ‘narratives of loss’. Most of our interviewees reflected in one form or another on how managerial technologies – e.g. Performance Development Reviews, Strategic Investment Initiatives – harness people’s sense of self-worth to institutional goals and produce diverse forms of compliance:

We all have to have these performance and development review meetings every year where you’re supposed [to] discuss your work load and what you’re gonna do next year... And I think it’s very clever the way they do it, because academics in lots of ways are quite pre-programmed to be good and to want to show how good we are. So you put down everything you’ve done last year and

everything you want to do next year... and you want your head of whatever it is to say how clever you are 'cause you've got [this] grant and you got this paper published and you developed this new module and da..da..da..da... But of course that's the wrong way to approach it if you don't want them to ask you to do twice as much next year.

(...)

So everybody's focused on trying to get this [strategic investment] money and the only way to get it is to come up with some brand new wonderful idea that they might want to support. Then they might give us the money, but you then create a whole new set of work that you have to do and you still don't have what you needed to underpin the work that you were doing in the first place.

(Ruth)

What these quotes capture very powerfully is the insidious way such measures seem to colonise the souls of academics, producing compliance and implicating them in their own oppression. The data also show how corporatization works at the level of the individual academic, making it a part of their identity that they need to do better:

[A]t the same time the sort of pressure and the sense of forever being assessed and therefore watched, and the sort of feelings of anxiety and persecution and not good enoughness that can come up, I was just reminded of all that the other day... I was looking in my email and [saw that] in preparation for the next REF¹³ we have to begin to do annual tracking of our research activities. And I was

¹³ The REF (Research Excellence Framework, previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise) is a system of research quality assessment periodically conducted by the HE funding bodies for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to determine the allocation of research funds to universities.

thinking, oh fuck, I haven't got anything for the last year. Oh no, I've got a talk, yeah, I did that. And then I thought it's OK, I was actually sick for half of it, so phew. But you know, that pressure, the perniciousness, the toxicity of the new regimes is insane.

(Gloria)

In the new world of academia there is little space for the critically subversive academic. We are only expected to emphasise the positive. Ruth again:

People actually said to me well, the vice-principals [like to hear] good news, if you become another group of people who moan at them, then they target you for punishment, whereas if you tell them a good story about how many brilliant new ideas you've got, then they like you and give you money. That's fine, but it means that you have to keep on saying everything's wonderful when it's not.

Interviewees often also talk about the increased salience of PR, rankings and assessments in academic life, and the resulting changing quality of relationships among staff, as well as between staff and students, with students becoming less engaged and more instrumental in their approach to university education. As Thomas put it,

I don't know if it was caused by [the increase in fees] or it was just contemporaneous with it and caused by wider cultural things, but there was more the sort of a sense that we owe students certain things, so we need to, as providers of the service, do them in the way they would like them done. And is

this because you are paying fees and you think of yourself as customer? Never, you'd never say that explicitly, but I wonder if it's in part because there are more student feedback things now than there used to be, and these forms ultimately filter back, and there's no policing mechanism but there's a slight pressure to get the feedback higher. ... And I think at a subconscious level that inflects one's decisions somewhat. It's not quite the customer is always right but it's probably not worth annoying the customer too much.

In some cases these kinds of experience are contrasted with a more favourable past. Martin talked about his experience of working in a social science department in the mid '90s, implicitly contrasting this with the more authoritarian approaches to management that now prevail:

[It was] very decentralized, it felt schools had a lot of power, there were no faculties, no deans, it didn't feel very managerial. I had a lot of colleagues who sort of protected us, a very democratic department ... It felt like my family rather than a place of work.

Steven remembers that in the past academics had more space and time to spend on developing their ideas into meaningful publications as opposed to the "competent but mechanical work" that is so often encountered currently:

...one thing that I feel, and I know most of my colleagues feel, is that it's hard to see when we could ever have the time to do any ... reading that is not

immediately on the task in hand. Whatever it is that makes for good intellectual work, it's... meditating on things, coming at them from an unusual angle, seeing connections, finding significance in detail that have been in front of your eyes for a long time but somehow the moment wasn't right for you to see it. That kind of intellectual creativity depends upon reading around, it depends upon space, depends upon conversations... And if your work is so focused all the time... preparing that bit of teaching, preparing that grant application ... I think the danger is of producing competent but mechanical work... And I say it to be provocative, but some degree of idleness is in the end essential to the focus that produces very good work. And because we've got busier, because the external requirements of measurement have got greater, because professionalization is such a strong internalized force, I think, it's become harder to find the space for that to happen.

Heather talks about a change in the nature of relationships between students and lecturers and a change in the sort of person attracted to an academic career:

[When I was a student] you would knock on the professor's door ... and they would invite you in for a cup of tea, and although it was very formal ... they absolutely wanted you to be there ... Now, I think a lot of people have been attracted into academia that never would have before. Career academics ... not academic academics.

This dominant account of what is happening to academic lives and identities suggests a reconfiguration of academic virtue which has to do with being productive, bringing in money, promoting the university's brand and the brand of one's own work, being ready to compete as a department, as a member of the university, and ultimately as an individual.

Disrupting the simple story

Our findings suggest that there are good reasons to be sceptical about this simple story. In what follows we argue that the contrast between an idealized past and a corrupted present is crude and misleading in important respects and that the story of a neoliberal juggernaut crushing everything of value in its wake and colonizing the souls of academics is too one-dimensional and overly deterministic. We will use our data to show that academic identities¹⁴ operate in different intersecting spheres each of which creates different possibilities for compliance and/or contestation. Underlying our account is a caution about neo-Foucauldian analyses that inform so much of the critical literature on HE and that are implicit in some of our respondents' narratives. As Wacquant (2013: 8) suggests, such analyses can confuse the ideology of neoliberalism with its sociology. Arguably these somewhat homogenized portrayals of academia and the virtues of a 'good academic' stem from some of the flaws to be found in governmentality theories which treat neoliberalism as a "generalized normativity"... that "tends to structure and organize not only the actions of the governing, but also the

¹⁴ We use the term 'identity' not as an analytical tool, but rather as a 'category of practice' as defined by Brubaker and Cooper according to whom, identity, 'is used by "lay" actors in some (not all!) everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others' (2000: 4).

conduct of the governed themselves” and even their self-conception according to principles of competition, efficiency and utility’ (Wacquant 2012: 70). Our approach to understanding the ‘neoliberal university’ falls closer to that of Wacquant and others, who view the neoliberal project as more ‘open-ended, plural and adaptable’ (Peck 2008: 3).

Although there are examples in the life history narratives of the past being idealized, there are often also examples of poor practice, either experienced first-hand or witnessed – examples of lack of support, neglect, bullying, bad teaching and overwork – and a ‘pick and choose’ system where if you found a good mentor it might have worked for you, otherwise not.¹⁵

The quality of teaching was very bad. There were only about twenty undergraduates for my year, and twenty staff, so it’s interesting that the lecturers didn’t have very much to do but they still didn’t manage to do it very well...

(David)

In terms of my academic career, everything before the age of 35 I remember as extremely negative. Incredibly horrible things used to happen [in the ‘60s, ‘70s and early ‘80s] to women, to junior people, things you couldn’t imagine happening now, and the atmosphere was very hostile for all sorts of people, including black people... just like sort of straightforward racism.

¹⁵ The variegated picture that emerges from our interviews in part may reflect our methodology that took a holistic life history approach. I.e. rather than just focusing on the working life experience of academics (which might have reproduced simple stories of loss), we also asked about the personal dimensions of their lives and their earlier (student) experiences.

(John)

Other narratives challenge the image of an idealized past not from a student-experience perspective, but from a management perspective, arguing that academics used to be ‘unproductive’ and got away with ‘doing nothing’ for decades, so they had to be held to account – ‘managed’ – to start doing their jobs. An excerpt from Donald’s life history, a university manager and academic himself, exemplifies well this type of narrative:

British academics of the ‘60s were more cosseted than even in the ‘40s and ‘50s. You’d written a book that got you the professorship and you never publish again, it was a well-known syndrome. So of course when any of that cake was taken away the reaction was quite strong... So they’d all been moaning, but at somewhere like where I worked, given that they weren’t being made redundant, they were being propped up by the income generating activities of our management, then I think eventually most of them would say yeah, OK, maybe it’s not so bad after all.

Where accounts of a better past do feature, rather than taking them at face value it might sometimes be more accurate to view them as imagined pasts functioning as a means of re-asserting how things ought to be. In her study of the lives and experiences of academic biomedical scientists, Kerry Holden goes further, arguing that narratives of imagined pasts – lamentations over the loss of a ‘golden age’ – can play a depoliticizing role, operating not only as a means of building a secure and cohesive identity in troubled times but also as a means of motivating ‘people to apply their labour to

academic science without challenging the conditions in which they work' (Holden 2015: 42).¹⁶

Just as the past was not perhaps as rosy as some of the accounts suggest, so the present is in some respects less bleak than is conveyed by the simple story. The data – and our own experience – suggest a much more complex picture reflecting the fact that processes of neoliberalization are not complete, the structural pressures and discursive influences are variegated; and there are multiple possibilities for agency and/or for counter discourses. For example, the introduction of successive Research Assessment Exercises in the UK can be read as a negative move that creates a ‘factory model’ of academic production in which academics are put under immense pressure to churn out publications conforming to narrowly defined quality expectations at regular intervals whether or not they have anything of real significance to say. However, there are also more positive readings of these exercises. Pat Sikes (2009: 135), for example, has shown how, for colleagues working in new universities in the 1990s/2000s, the RAE ‘brought recognition and self-affirmation for those who want to be, and be seen as being, researchers’ in a context in which teaching had previously been privileged. In an analogous, although contrasting, move within the heavily research oriented Russell Group universities, a greater emphasis on teaching has been brought about by the raising of the tuition fee in 2010 and the increased salience of the National Student Survey (NSS) which ranks universities according to how satisfied their students are. Like the RAE this instrument has been widely castigated for its corrosive effects on academic work, resulting, as one critic puts it, in “the subordination of education and

¹⁶ In some of these cases, accounts of deteriorating work conditions might also simply reflect changes relating to the career stage of those being interviewed.

scholarship to the arbitrary imperative of student satisfaction” and a far less challenging educational experience for students who are constituted by the survey as passive consumers rather than active, engaged, independent learners (Furedi, 2012). On the other hand, however, the keen attention paid by university senior managers to the survey results has served to confer legitimacy on the kind of teaching-focused identities that previously tended to be marginalized in Russell Group institutions. For example, Martin was turned down for promotion twice, he believes, at least in part because of his focus on teaching. But then:

The sector got more interested in teaching, and therefore I, who had always been very interested in working with students, became able to have a career.

Similarly, the recent focus on measuring and rewarding ‘social and economic impact’ can and has been criticized for reinforcing an instrumentalist approach to research and teaching. However, there are also positive stories to tell about how this move has lent validation and recognition to forms of community outreach and scholar-activism that might once have gone unnoticed and unrewarded by university managers.

More generally, despite the many pressures towards conformity and the internalization of market oriented norms, and despite the multiple processes of bureaucratisation and technologisation that keep academics apart and weighed down by a continuous flow of seemingly pointless tasks, many UK academics tell more uplifting stories – of inspirational teaching and academic role-modelling, of colleagues’ extreme dedication to students, of supportive mentoring, collegiality, sociability and friendliness and a

spirit of critical dialogue all being alive and well in their departments and institutions. In other words, there are many positive currents that suggest the alleged neoliberal takeover is far from complete.

Moreover, the fact that academic identities operate in different spheres makes for complex patternings and combinations of compliance and contestation. These spheres include: the content of academic writing and ‘professing’; day to day practices at a micro level, e.g. relationships with students and immediate colleagues, and comportment within teaching, administration and research projects; institutional citizenship/service activities; and extra-institutional or national or international activism. An academic might be critical and subversive in one sphere, e.g. their academic writing, whilst fully compliant or at least unquestioning in another, e.g. in the sphere of institutional citizenship, or whilst acting in ways that are un-collegial in their day to day relationships with colleagues or that reflect an ethos of competitive individualism. David’s story reflects well such contradictions. A critical scholar in his writing and in his socially engaged projects, he describes how we can nevertheless fall prey to self-regarding, careerist orientations:

I was put in for early promotion for reader, and I was turned down... And I wasn’t very good at [dealing with it]. I was given it the next year, but it didn’t matter to me because I’d been, you know, turned down. And [very soon after this episode] I took a professorship at a different university... and to keep me, my own university offered me a professorship, but it was too late. So I’m quite

egotistical and it's easy now, because I've got a posh job, but ... I don't think in hindsight it's very good behaviour.

There are many examples in our data of social scientists engaging in multiple modes and spheres of contestation including: local micro-resistances, e.g. subverting or inflecting bureaucratic demands, or ironic distancing combined with superficial compliance; propagating, sustaining and/or recovering counter-discourses, e.g. within research groups, departments or more diffuse academic networks; refusals, protests and industrial action; and the creation of alternative spaces with non-dominant norms either outside of conventional HE boundaries or within pockets of HE institutions. For example, George decided early on not to have a partner and children and take only part-time jobs to free up time to engage in alternative initiatives. His life has been extremely precarious; at one point he was homeless for eight months being unable to earn enough to pay rent. However, he says that although he is part of the “ever-growing academic precariat” with all the resulting anxieties, he at least is free to do his activist-scholar work. He also talks about doing things ‘under the radar’ in the university:

[T]he victories amount to what you can get in under the wire, and I was taught a very good lesson by a massive inspiration who works at X University... he said we are getting these emails about the university's new mission statement and we know it's a lot of nonsense so we ignore them. Never ignore them. You can write one sentence different, because most folk are going to ignore them, so if you can change one sentence you can make a massive difference. And they put a sentence into the university's mission statement, that said something about the

university's public democratic mission to the community, and the next ten years they pointed to that sentence and were able to use rooms in the university for free, and bring the community in that they wouldn't have been able to have done otherwise. ...

Everyone says that critical thinking is important, is part of your employability agenda... so there's one where you can get stuff in under the wire in recent times, because if you get to teach critical thinking you can actually get to encourage people ... and even if you've touched one person in the class that's going away saying I'm just a little bit thinking differently [that means that] there is room to do something.

Others we spoke to have left academia altogether. For example, Daniel tried to be a full-time academic, but became disaffected after a financial mismanagement case and now does part time work in further education, to save time for his projects, e.g. working with/for homeless people. As he explains,

I never had any debts because of having a cautious approach to money... so making decisions haven't been based on finances. And the things I valued didn't cost me much money. The relationships that I've been in I haven't had children. So the responsibilities that I've had have been fairly minimal, so I haven't had to commit to things that would incur debt or put one in a position where you had no other choice than to take on loans or additional responsibilities financially.

Angela and Alan also left academia entirely and now make their livings by giving paid talks, working as journalists, and consulting – also to leave time for their projects that are related to HE. Silvia permanently left the UK and now works as an academic abroad. After experimenting with alternative educational projects and engaging in union politics to resist changes, she ended up being disillusioned with fellow UK academics who did not resist and were not, as she saw it, sufficiently self-reflexive when it came to their own environment.

Jonathan, Martin and Sophie tried to change the system from within, creating an innovative university-wide curriculum project that sought to inculcate more collectivist and critical pedagogies. In direct opposition to the culture of passivity and commodification of education that they attributed to the NSS and the wider HE market, their project positioned ‘students’ as engaged and active scholars who can – and are expected to be – equals of academics in research and learning. But, when this became increasingly difficult and tuition fees rose, they moved beyond the walls of academia creating a new extra-institutional HE project and establishing close links and networks with other, similar movements both in the UK and abroad. They all still work for mainstream universities but – as Martin sees it – for his actions to be consistent with his ideals, ‘to be part of a collective political project’, he needs to commit ‘professional suicide and make [himself] invisible’, by giving up his high-ranking position(s) within the university:

I'm ... going into the shadows, sharing a little office here. I used to have a big office on the top floor, but this is where I want to be now, in the shadow. Working towards sabotaging neoliberalism.

Jim and Simon describe their involvement in HE campaigns and movements that use social science methodologies to produce evidence to challenge the premises of HE policy initiatives. These movements have not been successful in disrupting the marketization and financialization of UK HE but, despite feeling very disillusioned, they do carry on networking and building new activities and projects designed to bring about positive change. As Jim explained, his most important question now is how to mobilize academics around certain issues:

One of the things I'd learned is that if you lose a battle and you are kind of pressed down, the way for you to break out is to form alliances outside... and there are some things you can see coming and you are never going to push them back, but you can create a niche beyond it; the way to do it is to mobilise other people with information. It helps to have a particular target, like when you know that a policy is going to come out, you can to some extent predict what's in it, so you write your response before you get it and then when you get it you check your response, and because you've done quite a bit of background preparation you are immediately out with a thing...

Paul and Karen are involved in broader social movements beyond the walls of academia, while Thomas, Roger and Julie tell stories of small scale resistance – such as not letting managers colonise their time. As Thomas explained, in his situation,

The outer pressure of family life erodes one's capacity to work at home or at the weekends, and then there's the sort of inner pressure of academic life which would push in the other direction. And in my own case I think probably the outer pressure of family life has sort of crushed the academic pressure, so I tend not to work in the evenings or at weekends...

Roberta, Jack and Karen practiced another kind of contestation from within. In different ways, each has used their positions in university management to promote and enact at least some of their educational ideals. As Karen put it,

If you don't have a professorial title then you need to go to look at a leadership management role, and [my experience in academia is that] having a title is great but having access to [a] budget is even better. So having the budget and having the positional authority I think is, for what I want to do, which is ensure that equality issues are embedded, so actually having the budget would make me do more on that than a professorial position.

Exploring tensions between contestation and compliance in narratives and practice

Making the simple story part of the assumptive world of HE scholarship can become a recipe for defeatism and a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we continually reproduce the pessimistic representations reflected in the simple story, we risk failing to reflect the kinds of practices represented in the previous section which are making a difference through, for instance, ‘under-the-radar’ actions and initiatives. On the other hand, there are dangers associated with celebrating complexity and playing up the significance of refusals and contestations which, in effect, are often localized one-on-one initiatives that are no real match for the concerted and highly efficient efforts of neoliberal politicians and university executives. For in doing so, we may end up obscuring the value of arguably stronger forms of resistance, for example, mass refusal to comply or mass industrial action.

In this final section, therefore, we want to use our data to try to make sense of what Jones refers to as ‘low level’ and ‘sporadic’ organised discontent amongst UK academics. In doing so we draw on Set Jansen’s analysis (2014) as to why people sometimes ‘yearn for the State’. According to Jansen, critical social science scholarship often posits the state as an imposed externality, reinforcing the assumed boundary between ‘state’ and ‘society’. As a result, much scholarship focuses on how people ‘*evade*’ state structures, and does not sufficiently explore peoples’ practices of ‘*non-evasion of state grids*’ (2014: 238-241). Jansen suggests that in order to understand people’s ‘strong yearnings for “normal lives” and, as part of that, for incorporation into a “functioning state”’ researchers need to reformulate currently existing conceptualizations of ‘state-making around a singular “standard grid” into a more multi-layered, dynamic and plural understanding’ where grids can ‘capture the intimate ways

in which efforts to restore routines of “normal life” were *implicated* in the production and functioning of ordering frameworks’ (2014: 243). Jansen’s findings show that when people sought incorporation into state grids, they wanted it ‘on their terms, and yearned for “normal lives” were projected to be calibrated by a *degree* of predictability. Grid evasion existed in tension with grid desire’ (2014: 255).

Jansen developed his analysis to make sense of the ‘hope for the state’ he observed amongst the inhabitants of a wartime Sarajevan suburb in the 1990s which contrasted starkly with the narratives of anti-statist resistance foregrounded in many anthropological studies. This approach can also, we suggest, helpfully illuminate the very different context of UK HE, where most of our interviewees, although unsatisfied with and critical of various aspects of academic working conditions and present-day HE institutional structures, did remain within the system and – given the option – in one form or other, wished to continue to stay in mainstream HE. If we examine our data through this lens, we observe that academics – experiencing the ‘disruptions’ generated by policy and institutional restructurings – often tried to re-establish rhythms and trajectories of ‘normal lives’ by creating new/alternative grids on which they could rely. However, in order to reduce precariousness in their lives, they also sought to connect their grids ‘upward and outward into “institutional statecraft”’ (Jansen 2014: 257).

When student fees were increased in 2010 and new providers were allowed to enter HE, practices of institutional incorporation for staff and students suddenly started to change across the sector. Some academics – more often those with secure contracts and/or in the old, wealthy universities – remained comfortable with the changing practices of

‘incorporation’ because, for them, it meant an increased level of security and wealth transfer. Many others – most often those with precarious contracts and/or in former polytechnics and smaller universities – felt that the changes were threatening their existence. As David put it,

My colleagues were all really scared. What had happened [when the cap on student numbers was lifted] was that half our students hadn’t turned up, fifty per cent of the students of the entire social science faculty. So if this happened again and again we’d have to sack half our staff, so these people were scared, and when people are worried about losing their jobs, they can behave very differently.

As our interviews indicate, this divergence in attitudes became an impediment to developing alternative ‘grids’ that could have underpinned a more concerted and collaborative effort at the national level. Jim reflects on these contradictions:

Lots of academics were worried about, well if we don’t have fees we’ll have cuts ... and that’s when we lost some academics. But... wanting to have fees, and not to take cuts, would be for the professoriate to wish to be in the top ten per cent rather than being satisfied with lower incomes. And ... quite a lot of people didn’t like those aspects [the prospect of cuts to incomes and/or jobs] ... So it was almost as if representing the students as consumer contained contempt for students, whereas it wasn’t students who were becoming consumers because of their instrumental attitude, we were complicit in their instrumentalisation.

This excerpt highlights how an idealized understanding of what ‘students’ should be was linked with a newly established oppositional category, the ‘consumer’, constructing and reifying a binary divide between the (ideal-typical) student and (ideal-typical) consumer. Such oppositional categories helped transpose academic-student relationships to a more instrumental level, and – as Jim pointed out – made it possible for many academics to accept the high fees and withdraw from contestational movements. Thus, academics who continued to feel secure in terms of institutional and financial support often withdrew from such movements after initial involvement, leading to the weakening and fragmentation of these networks. Others, whose precariousness increased, either did everything in their power to improve their position (e.g. changed jobs to be in large and well-funded research universities), or formed new cross-institutional and cross-national/international alliances to reach out to others and reduce precarity. However, most of these movements did not seek a total ‘evasion’ of state grids: many academics involved kept their jobs in mainstream universities and worked to develop new movements and structures that at some point could be linked back and ‘incorporated’ into institutional grids. But, they wanted this to happen on their own terms and by challenging existing norms and structures. One good example is the cooperative university movement, where a reoccurring discussion explored how the movement could issue degrees/diplomas to participants that would be recognised by academics and employers, and thereby push the state into recognizing the legitimacy of such alternative structures, and – possibly – lead to a rethinking of university fee policies.

Interesting patterns also emerged when we did a keyword search in our interviews for the term ‘normal/normality’ and then – to understand contextual uses – analyzed the narrative sections where these keywords were embedded. The results indicate that in many cases ‘normality’ was located outside of what was happening in universities or the everyday lives of academics. The term ‘normal’ was used within a comparative framework that allowed academics to talk about their *hopes* for a ‘normal life’ and distance themselves from aspects of the HE system that were most objectionable. In addition, by establishing what ‘normal’ ought to be, they were better able to articulate their anxieties, prompted by the recent experiences of disruption in their academic lives and fears of ‘falling off the grid’, i.e. being fired and not being able to get another job in the sector. This comparative framework was then used by interviewees to construct a narrative space for discussing both their analytical-critical engagement and their practices of compliance and contestation, without feeling as if the two were contradictory. At the same time, this framing created space to articulate what ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ meant in relation to HE, and on what grounds interviewees thought ‘leaving’ or ‘staying’ should take place. Sophie’s account reflects this complex framing:

I decided to leave, and people thought I was crazy, because I was the only one of my PhD cohort that had any stable work at all... It was hard, but I was very unhappy, and really sort of deeply depressed in that place. [But I was asked to do certain things and I felt] this just isn’t appropriate, and I thought I don’t want to become this person... And part of it is maybe that I am just maladapted, you do wonder this; other people seem less injured by it. And I think that’s one thing I’ve tried to work on a lot ... getting away from this wounded attachment to an

image of the university which the university is clearly not... so I can work critically within it until such point I decide not to... And I think that was a couple of years ago that I really did do a sort of taking stock because someone asked me, well why do you stay then? And I thought that's a fantastic question, as a way of gaining some perspective on the critique, because sometimes it is difficult but there are reasons that I'm here and it's useful for me to look at over time... and I think whether those have to [do] with habitus and privilege and stability and fear or whether it has to do with the fact that I think this is still a space of possibility and joy and social importance, you know, and so yeah... I think it's a combination of both.

It was those whose dissatisfaction with the system caused them to move 'outside' – either temporarily or permanently – that seemed more comfortable with making stronger arguments of contestation and evasion. However, for many of these academics, 'outside' only meant moving to 'parallel grids' – e.g. the state HE system of another country, another university/educational establishment, HE consultancy, HE journalism – and they used their positioning in these parallel structures to establish and keep 'inside' links with both mainstream and alternative HE institutions and movements. In actual practice, despite all the dissatisfactions narrated in their life histories, very few of our interviewees left the system/grid voluntarily; most needed an 'institutional push' to do so, e.g. when their job was terminated, their contract expired, or they got into irresolvable tensions with heads of programmes and/or management and they felt, as Martin put it, that

[n]ow it is not possible to be a critical, by which I mean functioning, academic, inside an English university, there is no space, it's gone. And I like to think of cracks and dialectics, but the space has been so shut down that we have to embed the institution somewhere else, in a different form.

Conclusion

We began by highlighting the apparent contradiction between the strength of the critique of neoliberal HE reforms within UK social science scholarship and the seeming ineffectiveness of social scientists' ground-level political responses. In seeking to illuminate and explain that contradiction, we contrasted the simple story of HE change with a more complex and variegated story that gives emphasis to the multiple possibilities for, and combinations of, compliance and contestation at different times and in different spheres and places. But whilst recognising this complexity, we have also sought to caution against accounts of contemporary academic practices which celebrate complexity and thereby, either implicitly or explicitly, perhaps exaggerate the potential for small-scale, fragmented and diffuse refusals and contestations to counter the neoliberalisation of UK HE in meaningful ways.

In attempting to understand the lack of a concerted and unified organised opposition, we shifted our focus from contestation to the '*non*-evasion of state grids' among critical social scientists. This helped us to see much more clearly that academic practices present a complex and interconnected pattern where there is no clear '*inside*' and

'outside' as was constructed and implied in the narratives. Such binary oppositions are shared narrative devices that can help academics to establish strategic positions and construct meaningful identities (Harms 2011). But, we suggest, these binary oppositions can become essentializing and reified and might contribute to limiting the space in which such concepts can be more fully explored and deconstructed to allow for common ground to be found on which broader HE movements can be efficiently organized.

As for the relevance of our findings beyond the British context and in Europe, we think our research demonstrates the need to pay close attention to specific cases and contexts in different spheres and levels of the academy. Such an approach helps us to understand in more detail what the constraints and possibilities are for academics who are differently positioned in academia and who are working in and across different spheres of action. A detailed analysis of cases and contexts coupled with an analytic frame that acknowledges the motivational power of yearnings for 'normality' also has some explanatory potential, helping us make sense of the apparently contradictory co-existence of contestation and compliance within the social sciences.

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