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Which side are we on? Feminist studies in the time of neoliberalism or neoliberal feminist studies?☆

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SYNOPSIS

This article explores some implications of new managerial 'reforms' for academic culture. More specifically, it explores the effect of neoliberal academic structure on the life of academic scholars by drawing on the working hypothesis that neoliberal practices resemble religious Christian rituals and evoke feelings of guilt and indebtedness. The author cites and analyzes excerpts from academics' narratives found in feminist literature in order to demonstrate how these new 'moral ethics' have been internalized by feminist academics and with what sort of consequences. She concludes by reflecting on the current state of affairs in universities and by posing questions for further investigation as a collective way of resistance.

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For we have to ask ourselves, here and now, do we wish to join that procession, or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?

–VIRGINIA WOOLF, *Three Guineas*¹

For several years now, much ink has been spilled over the understanding and the interpretation of advanced capitalism's mechanisms – in their different misleading guises – whether these operate in the field of health care, work conditions or educational policies. When it comes to academia, under the prevalence of a neoliberal regime, we have been witnessing lengthy discussions about the profoundly harmful effects on universities, relating to their structural transformations. Furthermore, apart from their 'institutional reforms' and 'cost rationalizations', universities have to cope with new moral ethics exacerbated by new managerial politics (Lynch, 2010: 54). For instance, terms like efficiency, accountability, and transparency have been parasitized in order to maintain moral connotations. Within this prevailing political and economic capitalist paradigm, feminist academics find themselves facing

insurmountable challenges, new paradoxes and intense ambivalences, as they have to teach gender issues "in a male-dominated and monodisciplinary academic context which is currently being structured by neoliberal economics" (Alvanoudi, 2009: 37).

Adopting a feminist perspective, in this paper I try to analyze how the university's neoliberalization has materially and emotionally affected academics and the reasons for which it has brought them, at least for the time being, in a state of uneasiness. First, I attempt to clarify the connection between present day academia and neoliberalism. Second, I argue that neoliberal practices resemble religious Christian rituals. As such, they establish feelings of indebtedness and guilt that, through a variety of mechanisms, have been internalized by academic scholars and have resulted in their gradual acceptance of the new managerial politics. To support the aforementioned interconnection between religion, debt and guilt in modern academia, I draw on Walter Benjamin's short essay "Capitalism as Religion" (1921/2005). Third, corresponding to Braidotti's incitement to "look at the internal forms of thought that privilege processes rather than essences" (Braidotti, 2011: 10), and in order to ground Benjamin's undifferentiated theory I explore the work of ethics in corporatized university, paying specific attention to feminist studies by analyzing academic

☆ This is an elaborated version of a paper delivered at the 3rd AtGender 1 Spring Conference, held 26–28 April 2013 in Gothenburg, as part of the panel "Academic Feminism at Corporatized Universities in Europe".

scholars' everyday discourses as micropolitical events in an attempt to connect them with macropolitics. I conclude by providing some reflective remarks on the current state of affairs in academia and by posing a series of questions that could be explored as collective ways of resistance.

Setting the scene

For over 30 years or so, the concept of 'neoliberalism' has been at the heart of many political, economic and academic debates. Depending on one's location, spatio-temporal context and vantage point, neoliberalism seems to mean very different things. As a set of certain profit-oriented beliefs, the neoliberal paradigm "involves a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject and the state" (Brown, 2006: 693). Under the neoliberal regime, the distinction between the social, the economic and the political is collapsing in what constitutes the marketization of the state, meaning that no longer does the state regulate the markets but instead subjects itself to their laws. The direct corollary of this is that economic criteria are applied in spheres of life that themselves are not of economic nature, while social relationships are rendered unthinkable out of the market economy to such an extent that the constant pursuit of profit in every aspect of human activity is being gradually naturalized (Evans, 2010: 16).

In the process of neoliberalization, though, most striking has been the 'invention' of crisis and the subsequent measures of austerity imposed. The state, from its previous form during the Keynesian era as a distant planner, has been gradually transformed into a "crisis state" (Gill & Pratt, 2008: 7). The concept of crisis, understood as the economic and political dimensions of specific economic problems' causes demanding social reforms, constitutes and represents in fact a violent struggle over the control of society. More specifically, it has generated a rapid income increase of elite and privileged groups while it has severely reduced wages earned by disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Oxfam International, 2014). In this sense, austerity programs, under the name of 'structural adjustments', have been decisive interventions in the fiscal crisis of the state but are based on specific class, health, race and gender features. Practically, this has meant the transformation of welfare states into market-dominated ones, which promote and support the requisite 'structural adjustments'. This change has resulted in the deregulation of economy, the hitherto public assets' privatization and commodification, severe budget cuts in welfare expenditures, disempowerment of trade unions and their bargaining power, flexible labor markets and the consequent established sense of precariousness, in terms both of declining job quality and worsening working conditions. As a result, contrary to neoliberal claims about the state's reduction in the economic and social spheres, technically the state's sovereignty and control over social life has been intensified (Ross, 2008: 44).

Another aspect of the state's submission to the demands of the market has been the rearrangement of the relationships between governing and governed subjects (Ong, 2006). Devising and inserting certain auditing techniques and means, which have been turned into operational and quantifiable practical policies (Lynch, 2010: 55), the task of government has been on the one hand to increase competition among the governed in order to achieve their ultimate functional optimization and efficiency. On

the other hand, individuals have been urged to take command of their own lives and bear full responsibility of their freely made decisions. In this sense, the citizen has been gradually transformed into an entrepreneur, responsible for one's own survival. Following this line of thought, neoliberal principles and mechanisms, despite first appearing as serving an ostensible new economic paradigm, were proved in the process to be biopolitical, in the sense that they functioned as a new way of living, acting, desiring, in a few words, as a new way of 'being'.

Within this framework, universities as institutions, which hold a dialectical relationship to economy and participate in production relations (Alvanoudi, 2009: 38), have been severely affected in different ways by the process of neoliberalization and their role has been inevitably redefined. Supported to a great extent by state and taxpayers' money, universities had to align with, adopt and follow the new neoliberal agenda. This agenda, inspired by a form of "coercive realism" (Evans, 2010: 15), contends that universities should provide evidence of their contribution to national economies, especially in times of crisis. Therefore, 'entrepreneurship' has to inspire their pursuits and a new relationship of government and knowledge has been established "through which governing activities are recast as non-political and non-ideological problems that need technical solutions" (Ong, 2006: 3). Accordingly, the fundamental right to education and the societal relevance that universities used to hold has been turned into business-oriented commodities, aligned with new managerial control practices. A series of management techniques have been introduced in order to rank institutions in terms of their services' quality to customers. From this perspective, students have been turned into consumers whose purchasing power defines the product that will be produced by corporatized institutions. The process of universities' engineering, during which any pedagogical idea and practice that does not culminate in fiscal efficiency has become illegitimate, has resulted into narrow training, instrumentalism, and transmission of decontextualized skills (Amsler, 2012a: 9).

At this point, it is worth mentioning the example of Greece in order to illustrate how the neoliberalization of higher education institutions has taken place in practice. At first, mass media in close cooperation with governmental politicians propagated a tarnished image of the Greek professors and students. Then, by subtly hiding the apparent detrimental effects of state underfunding of education and research, they addressed their deep concerns about the poor quality and underperformance of Greek universities. On the basis of low-ranking evaluations by purposefully unnamed international organizations, 'institutional reforms' and 'cost rationalizations' had to be applied in order for the universities to survive, be more competitive on a global scale and financially stronger in the future. Consequently, a plan for the universities' reform was designed and approved by the Greek parliament in 2013 under the name "Athena",² the name of the Greek goddess of wisdom and knowledge. According to the "Athena Plan", education cannot be freely available anymore and students are charged with fees; faculties and departments³ have either to be merged or close down; the Minister of Education is entitled to decide on academic issues and spending cuts without the need for parliamentary approval and private corporations are allowed to intervene in the institutions' matters provided that they

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