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TOWARDS A POST-NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY:  
PROTEST AND COMPLICITY

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It is probably fair to say that the recent protests at the University of Amsterdam, and the many other protests that are taking place at universities worldwide, are best interpreted as a revolt against the creeping neoliberalization of academia. The call of students and faculty for a New University should consequently be read as a very brave attempt to labor for a genuinely post-neoliberal university. This paper seeks to offer a brief reflection on some of the difficulties and (im)possibilities one encounters when struggling for a post-neoliberal university. No one knows exactly in advance what the post-neoliberal university should look like. To preface the prospects of a post-neoliberal university, it is therefore useful to analyze once more what university neoliberalism has in fact wrought. I will point out that even though the current protests highlight a number of global features of the neoliberalization of the university, one should also acknowledge its distinctively Dutch characteristics. Some of the questions at play in the current protests only make sense when considering the Dutch context and its local variety of neoliberalism. It is also against this background that one can begin to consider the question of the post-neoliberal university. I will offer some arguments as to why the post-neoliberal university is so hard to conceive and I will conclude by offering what I think is a necessary strategic supplement to the current protests. Now that the physical occupation of the university buildings has ended,

we should become complicit in building the new, post-neoliberal university to come.

I must begin however with a confession. When the first protests erupted at the University of Amsterdam, I felt ambivalent. It was my impression that the complaints about *rendementsdenken*, the blanket opposition to budget cuts in the Faculty of Humanities, and the demands for democratization were somewhat misguided. Part of my discomfort however was prompted by my own position in this. As an academic I study and teach the history and theory of neoliberalism. I am however also a director of a Bachelor's program in the embattled College of Humanities. With the protests erupting, I suddenly found myself at both sides of an emerging divide between 'Us' and 'Them.' I was part of 'Us' because I identify with the opposition to the neoliberalization of the university, but I was also part of 'Them' as I had even been involved in the design of the wretched Profile 2016 of the Faculty of Humanities. I had been complicit and was caught red-handed. I leave it to the reader to judge me for it, but I think that my complicity is far from unique and might in fact provide a key for advancing the cause of a new university.

Resisting the Neoliberal University...

My diagnosis is that the calls for a new university are prompted by a general discontent with the current neoliberalized state of academia. Why focus on neoliberalism? The reason is not to reduce the poor state of current academia to a simplistic reading in terms of a retreat of the state and a takeover by market forces. In many respects that is not what is going on. Calling the university neoliberal is meant to shift the focus to the various neoliberal practices, technologies, and rationalities that increasingly govern today's university. At home and abroad, universities for a variety of reasons have been reimagined in market terms and become suffused with market rationalities. Having displaced a broadly Humboldtian rationality that centered on academic *Bildung* through freedom and democracy, today's neoliberal university is increasingly legitimized and governed in market-like terms. It is this insidious neoliberalization of the university

that has been sparking the protests, and that the new university means to replace. It is a neoliberalization moreover, that has taken all shapes and sizes around the world (neoliberalism at Harvard is not the same as neoliberalism in Amsterdam) and led to a host of different excesses.

Given that the neoliberalization of the university takes so many shapes, it is useful to draw up a provisional, non-exhaustive list of some of its known symptoms. They are all distinct manifestations of the marketization of different aspects of the university through the application of markets and especially market-like practices, technologies and rationalities. Neoliberalism differs greatly between national contexts, between state and private institutions, or between research and teaching-oriented institutions for instance. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of the neoliberalization of the university (and I use the term neoliberal as a shorthand of neoliberalized), to emphasize the dynamic nature of the process, but also as a reminder that the process of neoliberalization is not complete and that there are still many places and contexts in the university that have not been affected. To a large extent, classrooms and seminar rooms for example remain to be governed by Humboldtian norms. The neoliberal university syndrome can be characterized by the following symptoms:

1. *Marketization of the meaning of the university*: The most fundamental symptom of the neoliberalized university is that it is increasingly understood in market terms. Rather than viewing the university as a community of scholars and students in the pursuit of value-free knowledge, it understands the university as marketplaces of ideas, where scholars and students, produce, exchange and consume valorized knowledge. Universities are no longer a public or common good, but to answer Collini's question, universities are good for the market.

2. *Privatization as de-publicization of the university*: The marketization of the university's meaning leads to a privatization of its values, funding and governance. Funding and governance need not actually be privatized. Even though the funding and governance of Dutch universities is still overwhelmingly public, they are increasingly governed as if they were private to the extent that private rather than public interests govern their actions.

3. *De-democratization of university governance and accountability*: Marketization of the university has subverted the understanding of who should be governing the university and to whom it is accountable. It has displaced democratic ideals of a university governed by and for the academic community or society at large. Absorbing the image of the market as a self-regulating, spontaneous order, democratic ideals of governance and accountability are being subverted, leaving it utterly underdetermined as to who has a final say and to whom one is answerable.

4. *Entrepreneurialization of the academic ethos*: Viewing universities as marketplaces of ideas, summons the ethos of the entrepreneur. It views universities, its departments, research institutes, researchers, professors, and students as entrepreneurs of their own success. It stimulates a range of performance indicators, incentive schemes that call on the various actors to take initiative and excel. Departments, teaching programs and researchers are encouraged to take risks and need to permanently compete for funding and recognition. Evaluation of research and teaching is largely based on output and thoroughly externalized while leading to continuous cycles of booms and busts between departments and programs.

5. *Precarization of academic work*: The marketization of the university has also led to a different material organization of intellectual labor. Where the university used to consist of a community of tenured members whose academic freedom was protected, the entrepreneurial university with its booms and busts due to competitive research and teaching finance increasingly requires a highly mobile intellectual labor force. As a consequence the university's commitment to academic labor has plummeted, giving way to a growing army of precarious intellectuals.

6. *In-equalization of the academic community*: Market logic values and promotes inequality rather than equality. A neoliberal academic community is therefore more likely to reinforce existing gender, ethnic and socio-economic disparities among its faculty and students, rather than redress these issues and reduce inequality. The ubiquitous diversity policies of many universities hardly operate as binding principles for creating an inclusive community of research and education, but instead function as marketing slogans for attracting international elites.

7. *Financialization of university funding*: With the market rationality prescribing that the various units of the university are considered valuable assets, university funding is increasingly subject to financialization in being based on borrowed money. In the US, private universities have traditionally depended for their operation on their endowments, which often operate as gigantic private equity funds. Having become aware of the value of their assets in real estate for instance, universities elsewhere have used that as leverage for engaging in risky capital projects without proper democratic control. Students too, urged to view their education as a valuable investment in their human capital, are more and more becoming indebted, increasing the financialization of the university system even further.

8. *Commodification of research and teaching*: In the marketized university, research and teaching tend to be cast as goods that are produced and consumed. Research is parceled out in projects with specified inputs and deliverables. In research assessment, output and valorization are gaining in importance. Attention shifts to research that can be marketized through patents or through commissioned research and development. Teaching programs are marketized to students and considerable resources are spent on attracting students at home and from abroad. The marketization of the university also calls on students to view their education as an investment product and universities as a service provider.

9. *Divisioning of labor between research, teaching and management*: With research and teaching viewed as commodities and the rise of an entrepreneurial ethos, there easily emerges a division of labor between the three roles of the academic. Functionalist market logic has disintegrated the academic into the component parts of research, teaching and governing the university. It has led to a new, hybrid hierarchy between these three functions, pitting academics versus administrators, and research against teaching. Administrators appear to be determining research and teaching, while academics tend to favor research over teaching and despise departmental service.

10. *Corporatization of university research, teaching and governance*: Having submitted to a market rationality, neoliberal academia is more easily prey to usurpation by corporate interests and other external economic forces. In some fields, universities have become an integral part of medical, technological,

military and industrial complexes, while in others they have closely aligned themselves with powerful economic and political interests. Thus the university is experiencing more difficulties maintaining its independence.

As this list testifies, the university has turned into a hybrid and complex neoliberal entity. Focusing on the various neoliberal technologies that are at work in today's universities one notices that the university has not unequivocally been relegated to the market, nor has the state retreated. Rather, neoliberal academia has been pervaded with market-like technologies and market rationalities. These market technologies and rationalities however have thoroughly deconstructed the Humboldtian ideal of the university and produced a neoliberal monster, that is half public, half private, that is hardly democratic, and in which teaching and research lost a large part of their original meanings. Neoliberal market-talk and technologies have altered and undermined academia beyond recognition, to an extent that there is no straightforward way back.

... with typical Dutch features

While many of these global features appear in various degrees at universities worldwide, the exact shape of the neoliberalization of academia tends to be determined by local conditions. Although similar neoliberal technologies are at stake, neoliberalization at private Ivy League or state universities in the US with their different scales of corporate and charitable funding and saturating student loan markets, or the neoliberalization of universities in the UK through the Research Assessment for instance, are highly dissimilar. No doubt, neoliberalization means altogether different things at universities in Europe, Latin America, China, South Africa, or Israel because of differing political, economic, and social conditions.

The protests in Amsterdam should therefore also be read as resisting a specifically Dutch articulation of these global technologies. This specific context moreover, should be taken into account when considering the prospects for a post-neoliberal university in the Netherlands. The specific-

ity of Dutch context is perhaps best explained by referring to the centrality in the protests of the untranslatable term of *rendementsdenken* (literally: efficiency or profit thinking). Why did *rendementsdenken* become such an important rallying cry? For one it is a confirmation that neoliberalism is not in the first place about directly relegating universities to the marketplace, but that it is about remaking the university in market terms using market-like technologies or rationalities. There is however, I think, a second reason why this term became important, which follows from a specifically Dutch variety of neoliberalism. What is prompting the market rationality in Dutch universities? Who is forcing universities into *rendementsdenken*? Notwithstanding important ideological trends or significant economic factors impinging on the universities, the main impetus has unmistakably been the state.

Unlike for instance the US, where neoliberalism has largely been an anti-statist project, the Netherlands has been characterized by a state-led version of neoliberalism. The call for more markets and increased '*marktwerking*' (another Dutch neoliberal neologism) has in the Netherlands been led and propagated by the state. It should not be overlooked that Dutch universities are by and large public entities, whose actions are governed by public law and that are funded by the state. Decisions to redirect funding from universities to funding bodies such as the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) and the setting of research priorities in the so-called Top Sector Policy have been propelled by the state. Especially the performance requirements ('*rendementseisen*') for degree diplomas that universities have to reach in order not to receive a reduction in funding, have been imposed by the state. Up to a large extent, it is the Dutch state that has been neoliberalizing the universities. This is not to say that Dutch universities from top to bottom have not willfully been incorporating this market rationality, nonetheless the structural condition remains that of a state-led neoliberalization. Anyone considering the prospects of a post-neoliberal university in the Netherlands will have to take these structural conditions into account, either by addressing them on a state-level or by challenging them in local practices.

The Challenge of a Post-Neoliberal University

The financial and economic crisis that has swept the world since 2007 was expected to inaugurate the end of neoliberalism and the beginning of a post-neoliberal era. These hopes have however not materialized, and inquiring why it faltered may offer relevant insights into the prospects for a new, post-neoliberal university. What are the difficulties with moving beyond neoliberalism? The geographers Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner (2010) offer three reasons why the financial and economic crisis did not present a 'Berlin Wall moment' for neoliberalism. The first has to do with the nature of neoliberalism itself. The notion of a crisis, they argue, presupposes some sort of 'monolithic' structure that can be struck down or repudiated. If we look at neoliberalism however, and the way it has manifested itself within the university, it becomes clear that it in fact amounts to a highly mobile set of market technologies and rationalities that are not removed in one fell swoop. The image of the market has been used in myriad ways inspiring just as many novel meanings and ways of governing the university. These various technologies and rationalities cannot be removed overnight with the establishing of a New University or a moratorium on market thinking. It will have to go by destabilizing current market thought and a continuous rethinking of the university, a process that has only just begun.

A second reason for why the current crisis cannot immediately bring about a post-neoliberal university relates to the hybrid character of neoliberalism already observed above. Besides lacking an easily identifiable center, its technologies and rationalities also appear to be parasitical on other social formations. Because neoliberalism has commingled with existing institutions such as the state or the university, it is also harder to disentangle it from the latter. Neoliberalism has not replaced the state and the university, but has deconstructed their meaning and modes of operation. These neoliberal deconstructions are not undone with one big-bang operation, but require further deconstruction. To give an example, the competitive market logic that has accompanied the current modus of grant applications through NWO or ERC for instance is not easily disentangled from contemporary academic life. These grant processes have changed the way we think about research and what good research is. There are powerful arguments (as well as interests) that will not make it easy to address even its smallest perversions. A similar argument applies

for instance to how we think of teaching programs and how to fund or appraise them. Neoliberalism deconstructed the old university and the major challenge faced by the new university is how to deconstruct its deconstructions.

This relates to a third argument of Peck et al. As opposed to the analogy with the Berlin Wall, where western-style capitalism was to replace socialism, in the case of the neoliberal university there is no ready alternative. This in part explains why the protests were sometimes met with skepticism. While the protestors pointed at problems, they were accused of not offering readymade, 'concrete solutions' (the latter being a prerequisite in Dutch politics). Having deconstructed the university, post-neoliberal answers however are not lying waiting in the wings. The political theorist Wendy Brown (2003) has warned in this context against a form of pre-neoliberal nostalgia. She notes that in trying to formulate an answer to neoliberalism one is easily forced into a state of nostalgia, literally a longing back for an ideal situation that never was, by starting to defend a less than ideal past. In the current debate we see that the neoliberal university is countered by defending Humboldtian or democratic pasts without regard for their discontents. It has led Peck et al. to conclude that the crisis will not and cannot immediately inaugurate a post-neoliberal world, but that it will for the time being stay with us as a zombie neoliberalism that roams around in a dead body. The protests may have begun slaying the neoliberal university, but its dead practices and rationalities continue to live with us for a little longer. The current challenge for the post-neoliberal university is that it desperately needs new imaginaries, in part inspired by older ones, and in part by deconstructing its current zombie shape.

## The Post-neoliberal University to Come: Protest and Complicity

What then are the prospects for a post-neoliberal university? The protests in Amsterdam led to major achievements. Above all, it forced the University of Amsterdam to begin reconsidering many of its neoliberal practices. And it galvanized large parts of the academic community to begin discuss-

ing and rethinking the practices in their own departments, even if they did not necessarily agree with the points made by the movement. As such, the protests have left practically nobody within the academic community unaffected. Did it bring about the post-neoliberal university? The argument of this paper is that protest alone can hardly be expected to do that. The protests were very important for undermining and delegitimizing existing neoliberal rationalities, but more is needed to rework them into truly post-neoliberal practices. The protestors can however claim their first victory as they have set in motion one of the first large-scale post-neoliberal experiments within academia.

This paper argues that the post-neoliberal experiments can only be successful when they manage to deconstruct current neoliberal practices and rationalities. The reason to be wary of calls for democracy and the invoking of Humboldtian principles is that these suggest that a – potentially nostalgic – return to previous ideals could simply replace the currently dominant neoliberal norms. If one however underestimates the ways in which neoliberal reason has infiltrated and subverted university practices, calls for democratization and the reinstatement of lost academic values alone will, I am afraid, fail to achieve lasting practical effects. My alternative is therefore to advocate a position somewhat loosely inspired by the various 'new materialisms' popular today, which is to acknowledge that neoliberal reason has become an entrenched part of academic practices and if anywhere, needs to be addressed exactly when and where it is active. As a means towards rooting out and changing neoliberal practice then, the theme of complicity re-enters.

At the beginning of this paper, I owned up to my complicity in the neoliberal practices of the university because I think I am hardly unique. Every academic, either as researcher or lecturer is highly complicit in neoliberal academia, whether by applying for competitive grants, begging for research time and less teaching or securing prestigious publications, and by attracting students to your program with attractive courses or giving an engaging talk during an open day. No matter what we tell ourselves, the disinterested non-neoliberalized academic is eventually a romantic fiction, as we all buy into the neoliberal system one way or another. With neoliberal practices so thoroughly entrenched, the most direct way to alter

them is by engaging them in our everyday work. Besides struggling for university-wide reform, the post-neoliberal university especially needs to be made in our classrooms, grant proposals, referee reports, academic associations, and our research, as well as in departmental meetings, in hiring committees, the board of studies or examinations board, and in our degree programs. It is only through these practices that the reimagining of the post-neoliberal university can really start to take shape. In absence of pre-ordained new imaginaries, the post-neoliberal university has to be reinvented on the spot and from the ground up. Only by thus reworking our complicity in the neoliberal university, can we build the post-neoliberal university to come.

An important complicating factor is that the widespread introduction of neoliberal technologies in the university has in many ways been a double-edged sword. While many neoliberal practices did thoroughly corrupt the soul of the university, some did in fact help partly recover it. One illustration is the sizeable rise of research funding through external bodies, such as NWO or ERC. This no doubt introduced a one-dimensional, competitive and extrinsic reward system and is undermining the unity between research and teaching. It however also created considerable opportunities for creative research, or under-represented groups for instance, to bypass existing hierarchies. Neoliberal funding technologies have undermined some university values, but liberated others. Another striking example is the advance of liberal arts colleges in the Netherlands. While these are in many ways the epitome of the exploitative character of neoliberal reason within the university, they have managed however to recover some of the values of liberal education, and a renewed devotion to teaching for instance, that was no longer available in the Dutch higher education system. The university colleges perhaps did it so well that we are all too ready to make ourselves complicit in its neoliberal structures by either taking up teaching or sending our children there to study. One of the challenges is therefore not only to abolish neoliberal technologies and its excesses, but also to incorporate some of its attainments. This asks for a reform strategy that does not plainly repudiate neoliberal reason but seeks to rework it by supplementing it with new principles and practices. Its double-edged nature explains why the neoliberal technologies are even more entrenched because they are valued for their promise of a positive

contribution to academia. This then presents an additional argument that our complicity is required to change neoliberal practice from the inside out.

With neoliberal reason deeply entrenched, it requires courage but also the assuming of responsibility to get our hands dirty in order to change our universities. It means taking responsibility for our teaching programs and the way we go about doing research, but also for the government of the institution itself. If the university is too precious to be left to managers, then we will have to assume that responsibility and reinvent it along the way. That requires going beyond nostalgia for a democratic and Humboldtian university that perhaps never was. But above all, it requires engaging the neoliberal zombies in our midst. This work can only be done by making ourselves complicit in the post-neoliberal university to come. My hope is that this way, the small-p post-neoliberal experiments at the University of Amsterdam and elsewhere, will inspire similar small-p experiments in other sectors, that may ultimately help bring down neoliberalism for good.

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