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**Figuring out the university and the student in neoliberal times:  
Reviews of *Learning under Neoliberalism* (Hyatt, Shear and Wright, 2015)  
and *Figuration Work* (Nielsen 2015)**

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The university today is in flux, and so is the nature of learning and what it means to be a university student. While terms like ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘globalization’ have been spoken of so frequently these days—both in academic and non-academic contexts—that they border on becoming hollow clichés, not engaging with these concepts and their implications for higher education transformations worldwide would not only represent a loss of a critical intellectual opportunity but, more seriously still, also the potential risk of seeing the university and the student slip into shapes and forms that we might retrospectively find unsettling and undesirable. *Learning under Neoliberalism* edited by Hyatt, Shear and Wright (2015) and *Figuration Work* authored by Gritt B. Nielsen (2015) are two good examples of such critical engagement. In this essay, I take turn to review these two recently published works, summarizing their scopes and notable contributions for readers who are interested in an anthropological/ethnographic take on critical higher education studies from the Euro-American perspective.

As its subtitle—*Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education*—suggests, Hyatt, Shear and Wright’s volume is a collection of ethnographic essays addressing issues pertaining to higher education (HE) governance under neoliberal conditions and changes. Observing correctly that the ubiquitous term ‘neoliberalism’ has often been used too broadly or too simplistically in existing literature, the volume editors state in the Introduction that, instead of starting with a precise definition of the concept, the volume allows the multiple and contested meanings of this notion to emerge through concrete ethnographic case studies. In the editors’ own words, the idea of neoliberal governance is generally associated with ‘processes like marketisation, privatisation, responsibilising individuals, auditing and accountability, and entrepreneurialism’ (p. 6), but these ‘similar constellations of ideas – not least about university reform – find very different expressions and outcomes in different national settings.’ (p. 5)

With the contributors being mostly anthropologists from Europe and the U.S., the volume features seven case-study chapters, four of them originating from the U.S. context and the rest from the UK, Denmark and New Zealand respectively. (Thus, one could argue that the volume is Euro-American-centric.) As Davydd Greenwood correctly points out in a helpful Afterword, all seven chapters in fact deal with public universities. While he sees this as a limitation in the volume’s scope, it is usually in public HE institutions that the tensions

between the public service model of the university and the neoliberal visions are most strongly manifested.

The first chapter in the volume by Cris Shore examines methodically the neoliberal reform of New Zealand's university system from the 1980s to fairly recent times. Periodising this process into three phases (1984-89; 1989-96; 1996-2008), Shore first enumerates the key developments under each of these phases, and then discusses thematically the effects of these reforms with the support of ethnographic evidence. In Shore's opinion, the New Zealand government's enthusiastic espousal of neoliberalism and their explicit view of HE as an 'export industry' has led to a situation where one increasingly wonders if the universities could still be regarded as universities (p. 51). While this is Shore's criticism of the extensive corporatization that has taken place in the New Zealand HE sector, he makes it clear that the question is ultimately one regarding the keen contestations over the meanings, the roles, and the social missions of the university.

The volume's final chapter, Chapter 7 by Susan Wright and Jakob Williams Ørberg, resembles Chapter 1 closely in its focus on analyzing *nationally* framed policy discourses and measures, and how these affected the national university system. Specifically, the chapter reviews how Denmark's 2003 University Law changed the governance logics of the Danish HE system in the name of making universities 'self-owning'. Wright and Ørberg's critiques revolve around the irony that while the 'self-owning' reforms were founded on the rhetoric of making the universities more autonomous through withdrawing direct state funding and control, by subjecting them to greater pressures of fulfilling government contracts and passing government audits, the universities were in fact made less autonomous. The authors also point out how this more business-like model makes the Danish university system less democratic.

Focusing on the transformations of the UK HE landscapes, John Clarke's chapter (Chapter 5) is somewhat similar to the above two chapters. But several differences stand out: first, instead of methodically documenting policy changes, Clarke's discussions are more chatty or discursive in style; second, preferring the term 'modernization' to 'neoliberalization', Clarke stresses that university transformations are not a coherent wholesale affair guided by a master ideology, but necessarily involve the 'overdetermination' between what is left of the old and what new that is imposed – something Shore readily acknowledges too (p. 50); thirdly, invoking psychosocial concepts such as fear, loss, and melancholia, Clarke offers towards the end of the chapter a subtle analysis of the kind of sentiments and discourses that drive a volume like the present one, and cautions against being stuck in an immobilizing fixation over the loss of an imagined golden past of the university.

Unlike the above three chapters which all begin with the national-level policy changes and regulatory mechanisms imposed by governments espousing the neoliberal philosophy, which in turn frame more localized ethnographic data, the narrative of Hyatt's chapter (Chapter 2) is driven primarily by the unfolding

of the stories of a specific institution, in this case, Temple University in North Central Philadelphia. The research underpinning Hyatt's chapter began as a project for an Ethnographic Methods course she taught, in which she and her students investigated the uneasy relationship the local community had long had with the University due to the latter's neoliberal expansions and encroachment on the community's space and life-world. Running through Hyatt's ethnography is a reflexive account on the research process itself, which was also a pedagogic experiment, with which Hyatt illustrates the power of ethnography to 'study up' relations of inequalities and to challenge hegemonic narratives that the neoliberalizing project often feeds upon and reinforces.

Chapter 4 by Shear and Zontine draws on their graduate school experiences of organizing a reading group at the Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass). The reading group was aimed at understanding the host of changes then taking place or having taken place at UMass that the authors and the reading group members came to comprehend as university corporatization, which involved unsettling consequences for university faculty and students alike. Apart from critically discussing these deleterious transformations at the university level which the authors correctly argue to be symptomatic of a more general neoliberal class restructuring, the authors also self-critically reflect on the reasons why the reading group did not lead to any meaningful action of resistance, despite its success in raising consciousness and understanding. To this end, Shear and Zontine end the chapter with some thoughtful discussions on the relationship between academic theorization and activism.

Among all the chapters in the volume, Davis's (Chapter 6) is perhaps the most thoroughly personal in terms of the writing style and ethnographic data. The chapter centers on three episodes in her own academic career with that which Davis simply refers to as the 'College', which is part of a State University system, located near New York City. Davis's telling of these three auto-ethnographic instances in which her personal career and subjectivity as a Black anthropologist chafed against the neoliberalizing project of her institution, presents the readers with highly personal and relatable accounts on the ways in which these latter trends could have the effects of inducing fear and frustration in a faculty member who is committed to infusing her teaching with the spirit of social justice activism.

One common challenge facing edited books lies in bringing about a sufficient level of coherence amongst the chapters, and maintaining a high level of relevance of each towards the overarching theme of the book. In this volume, Lyon-Callo's chapter (Chapter 3) includes some discussions about K-12 school reforms in Michigan State and reflections on how university students he taught discursively understood and responded to the increasing levels of insecurity and anxiety caused by neoliberal restructuring of the state's economy. In this sense, the chapter is not primarily about the neoliberalization of HE *governance* per se, in the way the six other chapters more strictly are. Nevertheless, through

highlighting the apparent acceptance of neoliberal rationalities and discursivities by school children's parents and undergraduate students in Michigan, the chapter remains a highly relevant critique of the level of hegemony neoliberal mentality has achieved on people concerning matters of education.

In fact, on the whole, the volume's chapters come together very well around the central theme of HE neoliberalization. Common themes such as corporatization, standardization, illiberalization, precarity, de-democratization, resonate throughout. One key feature that characterizes all the chapters and distinguishes this volume as a good example of a deeply engaged anthropology of (HE) policy is the way in which the ethnographer-authors' own voices, and their subjectivities, are deeply integrated with policy analysis and critique. All authors enlist their personal experiences and observations as ethnographic evidence, which certainly livens up the prose.

Arguably, the reader might notice the interesting fact that the four chapters based on U.S. cases exhibit more explicit elements of activism in the authors' scholarship. This is not only expressed through the more personalized and self-reflexive writing styles found in these four chapters, but also demonstrated by these authors' self-documented efforts in exploring counter-strategies or resistances against the neoliberal agenda, often through pedagogical experimentations. From the palpable frustrations, even pains, with which these authors recount their counter-hegemonic struggles, one realizes that consciousness does not necessarily lead to successful resistance, and university academics are often caught in situations of ambiguity or dilemma facing their employers' neoliberalizing ambitions. Nevertheless, as the volume editors note in the Introduction optimistically, 'All of the chapters point to inconsistencies, cracks, contradictions, and possibilities in the various expressions of neoliberalisms that can be exploited in various ways and where the future is far from being a *fait accompli*.' (p.21)

Although all the chapters have previously appeared in the journal LATISS's (*Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*) two issues in 2010 and 2011, as the editors reassure us, these have been updated accordingly when they were included in the present volume. It is perhaps true that by now the concept neoliberalism *per se* has spurred such an extensive scholarship in the social sciences that the term may come across even somewhat over-written, yet, the neoliberal restructuring of HE worldwide certainly has not been subject to the same amount of critical scrutiny. As these processes continue to roll out and deepen, and their deleterious consequences become increasingly manifest, a volume such as this – notwithstanding the fact that it draws on previously published materials – should be very welcome to serve potentially as a starter to a wider critical conversation.

While the term 'neoliberalism' does not appear in the subtitle of Nielsen's ethnographic monograph *Figuration Work*, this work is just as much about the same host of issues under examination in the edited volume. *Figuration Work*, takes as its analytical focal point the *figure* of the university student, and is

concerned with how this figure is one of contestation and ambiguity, emerging out of complex processes of articulation and entanglement, but never fully settles. In other words, through investigating how the university student is variously figured—thus the title of the book ‘figuration work’—Nielsen seeks to show the multitude of forces at play in transforming HE. As the author puts it in her characteristically eloquent and clear style: ‘in this study the notion of “figuration” entails an unfolding of the compositional elements of the figure; that is, an exploration of the various temporal and transient assemblages of, for example, political technologies, pedagogical practices and personal desires that come together to work’ (p. 19).

Nielsen’s ethnographic locus is the higher education sector in Denmark, and this book is grounded in fieldworks conducted at three Danish universities. Also giving a central place in the analytical schema to the Danish University Act of 2003, a landmark ‘neoliberal’ legislation, Nielsen’s work may in fact be read in conjunction with chapter 7 in *Learning under Neoliberalism*, as an extensive ethnographic case study that uses the student figure as a leverage or unique lens for understanding Danish HE.

For Nielsen, figuration is of as much conceptual value as it is of methodological value. In her words, ‘the anthropological field is conceived of as a space of (frictional) figure production’ (p. 15). And her way of investigating such figure production is through looking at what she calls *frictional events*—‘moments of contestation or ambiguity’. The second part of the book, chapters 4-6, comprises thick descriptions of such frictional events, respectively addressing the figuration of the student at three levels: the pedagogical, the institutional, and the (national-)political. In these three very well written ethnographic chapters, the contestation and/or ambiguity revolve specifically around the figuring of the student as (1) inquisitive learner vs. acquisitive learner (chapter 3); (2) co-owner vs. customer (chapter 5); (3) student-as-such vs. student-as-citizen (chapter 6). In essence, the author’s key question is one about the idea of student *participation*. As she reveals in the concluding part of the book, “The different chapters, therefore, have explored the multiple, overlapping and competing ways in which students today aim, and are enabled or encouraged, to participating in *pedagogical* as well as *institutional* and *political* settings’ (p. 226; emphases original).

Perhaps it should not be unfair to say that, compared to *Learning under Neoliberalism*, *Figuration Work* has a much stronger anthropological ‘flavor’. This is not only because of the simple fact that the latter is an ethnographic monograph—the classic textual form of social anthropology; it also owes to Nielsen’s extensive engagement with the anthropological literature. The book has a substantial bibliography that acknowledges influential figures in the field (such as Marilyn Strathern, Anna Tsing and Aihwa Ong), and of course the very notion of ‘frictional event’ is inspired by Tsing’s widely influential work. Furthermore, throughout the book the author has done an impressive job in weaving anthropological theories and concepts (e.g. figure/figuration, scale/scaling,

friction, fractality, assemblage, temporality/rhythm, etc.) into her empirical materials. While on occasions one gets the impression that quotes from certain anthropological canons are taken out of their original contexts and somewhat artificially inserted into the ethnographic narrative on Danish higher education, Nielsen has no doubt achieved a remarkable degree of success at making her study of education distinctively 'anthropological'. Insofar as the study of higher education goes, such examples are perhaps not many. The author's emphases on *oscillation, ambiguity, entanglement, ambiguity* and similar notions throughout the study also distinguish *Figuration Work* as a work that showcases the unique strengths of the anthropological/ethnographic perspective to offer subtle and nuanced analysis. Compared to *Learning under Neoliberalism*, thus, the critique of HE neoliberalization in Nielsen's monograph may come across as somewhat toned-down.

All in all, *Learning Under Neoliberalism* and *Figuration Work* are two important contributions to the critical studies of HE transformations taking place in the Western world today. They go some way in helping us figure out the ways the university as an institution and the student as a telling figure are changing, for better or worse, in neoliberal times. Notwithstanding their shared Euro-American focus, these works has much to offer in terms of inspiring similar kind of endeavors in other geographical and sociocultural contexts. These two volumes stand out because of the rich original ethnography and critical thoughts they offer. Both very well edited and/or written, these two volumes promise to be a delightful read, and will likely make the readers feel they are taking part in an engaging conversation.

## References

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