Evaluating Academia.

Between Old Hierarchy and New Orthodoxy.

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There is a growing body of literature and events critiquing the spread of ‘audit cultures’[1] in Western research institutions. In brief, these audit cultures imply the assignment of numerical values to the ‘output’ of researchers, the ranking and/or financing of institutions, departments and/or individuals based on these values, and, perhaps most significantly, the dependence of the financing of new research on the forecast of research ‘output’ ahead of time—in essence asking that researchers predict the outcomes of research not yet undertaken. Although audit cultures are based on the ideology of transparency and accountability, their implementation is rarely accompanied by exercises in deliberative democracy; rather, ‘transparency’ concentrates on the production of information that conforms to particular language and formats (Neyland 2007). Although in some instances they undermine entrenched inequalities of power within academia,

audit cultures also often produce tighter top-down controls and new, steeper power hierarchies, rather than the level playing fields they promise.

The emergence of audit cultures fits into the longer-term process of bureaucratization and democratization of the management of science (and other forms of ‘expertise’), which in turn is part and parcel of the expansion of public policy into the previously elite realm of intellectual activity in the name of public financial and ethical oversight and is partly due to the result of growing distrust in the positivist promises of science since the 1960s (see Latour 1987). But audit cultures seem to fit more specifically the neoliberal ideal of the autonomous, productive, improvable person who should be made responsible for his/her own upkeep, given the tools to achieve it, and then allowed to prove his/her worth.

In recent years many countries, notably in Europe and parts of Asia, have moved to roll back public expenditure for universities, and to demand that an increasing share of their budgets come from the private sector. In Europe and Australia, such painful monetary cuts, conducted under the guise of reorganizations and new techniques for improving efficiency, often resort to audit discourse in an attempt to avoid or defer tackling the fundamental conflict between the insistence on the ‘research University’ and the relentless expansion of higher education, driven largely by political agendas and misguided state financing models. Considering the obvious unsustainability of these models and the transparency of attempts to use audit cultures to justify cost-cutting exercises with purely financial rationales (Rutten 2010), we are puzzled by and interested in the little, and mostly unorganized, protest that is being mobilized by the academic staff in universities around the world. The fact that many academics resort to the ‘weapons of the weak’ (grumbling in the hallways or passive resistance to implementing new policies) when confronting such imposed changes on their working environment and the merits of higher education for society at large is all the more surprising given the protective tenure position which many of the staff enjoy. At the same time, we dispute the blanket view that equates audit cultures with privatization. America’s private university system does not resort to the kind of audits preferred by European (de)regulators: a more pressing concerns for American academics is the increasing casualization of employment, and at the moment, state universities seem to be moving, if anything, to more old-fashioned

management (ckelty 2010) under the influence of the financial crisis (Yanow 2010, Hagman 2010). In China, the introduction of audit cultures has come with more rather than less state funding for elite universities. These have become much less dependent on corporate funds than they were in the 1990s and have allowed their faculty to stake out more independent positions in public debates. At the same time, Chinese versions of auditing sometimes combine the ‘measurements’ familiar in Europe with the existential threats of the Us tenure system (Chen 2010, Lin 2010).

We will not restate here the many fundamental implications of audit cultures for academia; rather, we refer the reader to Chris Lorenz’s contribution (2010) and to Rosalind Gill’s article in *Silence and Secrecy in the Research Process* (2010, reviewed here in Chow et al. 2010). Instead, we want to point to some limitations of this discussion to date.

First, critiques of academic audit cultures tend to be either specific to particular national or institutional contexts, usually with activist aims, or else highly abstract, as if the processes in academia—Western academia, at least—were homogeneous and as if the term ‘neo-liberalism’ were sufficient to explain them. The highly divergent departure points of national academic structures, their differing economic and administrative logics, the varied forms of academic power, inertia, hierarchy, culture and structure that respond differently to similar pressures have largely evaded scrutiny, to the point that the erroneous identification of research assessment exercises with the United States—as a form of justification for introducing them elsewhere—is rarely challenged. One result of this lack of comparative perspective is a certain fatalism—mostly in Europe and Australia—that mistakes particular managerial fads for the single and inevitable path into the marketized future, whether welcomed or loathed. There is neither substantial discussion nor mobilization (Anderson 2008)—with the exception of France, where it is linked to the abolition of the special status of researchers in the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (Cnrs) network. As signaled in the title of this traverse, we find it necessary to caution against both the conceptual simplification and the idealization of either the ‘good old days’ or the internationalized tomorrow.

Second, among our colleagues in the humanities and social research it is customary to blame natural scientists for the advent of such ‘measures of success’ as publication counts, citation indices, impact factors and collaborations, creating the illusion that audit cultures work very well for physicists or biologists. Yet while the measuring rods employed in audits may arouse less resistance among some natural scientists, the transformation of the intellectual enterprise and the intolerance of long-term uncertainty that audit cultures imply is even more portentous for the future of discoveries in the basic natural sciences.

Third, for all the talk about the globalization of education and all the gestures towards China and India transforming global academia as the increasingly dominant source of students and scholars, there has been little attempt to understand either how these changing demographics are affecting academia beyond its economics (for example, through the reconfiguration of institutional rankings and their criteria) or how the domestic research scene in India or China itself accommodates the ideology of audit.

Our traverse therefore offers a comparative perspective that has generally been left out of the discussion to date. The contributions we have solicited point to the similarities but also the differences in the meanings and structural implementation of audit cultures in the Us (Yanow 2010, Hagman 2010), Europe (Rutten 2010) and China (Chen 2010, Lin 2010). The common picture that emerges from these contributions, read against the rest of the traverse, is the discrepancy between the declared aims of audit cultures in their existing forms and the results they deliver.

Illustration: tristam sparks, “european union colours”, 4.8.2005, Flickr (Creative Commons license).

Résumé

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Notes

[1] ‘Audit culture’ is a term made popular by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern to describe one aspect of ‘new public management.’ See Strathern 2000 and also Shore and Wright 2000.

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