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The Scholarly Affair Is Self-Love

An anecdote: I was at a faculty in-service to discuss supervision practices. This was shortly after our dean's email insisting that all such faculty functions were now obligatory, which followed the email stipulating that academics were no longer to work from home. The in-service involved splitting into discipline-defined small groups, discussing various issues and then reassembling as a collective to share with others the ideas garnered in discussion. As per usual, each group selected an individual to take notes and then deliver a summary to the collective. I have to say that I detest this method of collaboration; the reporter invariably ignores extreme or conflicting opinions, on the grounds that they are not representative, and focuses instead on those banal commonalities that all agree upon. It is a sham parliament. Yet this time there was a perceptible difference. The reporters were not just offering commonplaces. They were doing that, of course, but they were also at pains to insist that their groups had done all they had been asked to do. They had been good.

Your ears attune to that subtle difference in the moral economy of discourse, and you start to notice it in other parts of faculty life as well. I began to realize that reports to faculty forums from various committee heads and associate deans invariably had this tone of self-exoneration to them. I started to hear elements of self-congratulation, too. These academics were not just telling us how good they had been; they were beaming on the inside, as well. What, I began to wonder, is this neoliberalism that involves producing such constant statements of personal perfection? What is this diffuse egomania?

The moment you think about it, it becomes obvious that the neoliberal public sector produces endless qualitative self-assessments, and *cannot* but do otherwise. Critiques of neoliberalism that focus on its innate drive to reduce all complexities to quantifiable inputs and outputs, the better to audit the employee's attainment of standardized targets (Marginson 1997: 84–6; Harvie 2001; Redden 2008: 4), miss this qualitative dimension of the audit. But, actually, it could not be otherwise, and the reason has to do with the sheer complexity of professional life. After all, it is by no means easy to invent persuasive quantitative measures. The fact that so little of reality is mapped by them is obvious the moment you try to seek out a specific

statistic for an issue that interests you. The more non-economists become aware of the labour, and often-considerable ingenuity, that quantification involves, the closer we will be to a substantial critique of the neoliberal state.¹ That such a state's accounting practices need to be qualitatively supplemented in professional realms is particularly obvious in the academic case, where marketization is so comparatively new. Take my own institution, the University of Canberra. A performance-development review process inaugurated in 2008 involves academics responding to (that is, proving their viability in relation to) thirty-nine criteria, each of which are linked to the thirty-nine steps in the university's strategic plan, a charter promulgated as if from nowhere in 2007. Only seven of these criteria are outright quantitative (the ones to do with teaching assessments, grants and publications). For the rest, we are called upon to write self-congratulatory essays. What is more, such narcissistic autobiographies are institutional necessities. When I say they are institutional necessities, I mean that in the newly distrustful, all-contractual mode of workplace relations, where the internal institutional currency has become self-interest pegged to price-like signals of punishment and reward, and the expropriation of the scholar's reading time the norm, people no longer have the capacity to do much more than meet their various audits. In such a climate, what is not audited frequently does not get done. Which is why if there are no numbers—and there so frequently are not—we are asked to produce a flattering autobiography instead. Neoliberalism spawns endless displays of self-love.

The point of this offering is the intersection between these considerations on the neoliberal self-report and Jacques Lacan's discussion of the libidinal function of academic knowledge production:

The myth of the ideal I, of the I that masters, of the I whereby at least something is identical to itself, namely the speaker, is very precisely what the university discourse is unable to eliminate from the place in which its truth is found. From every academic statement by any philosophy whatsoever, even by a philosophy that strictly speaking could be pointed to as being the most opposed to philosophy, namely, if it were philosophy, Lacan's discourse—the *I-cracy* emerges, irreducibly. (Lacan 2007: 63)

What, I started to think, if this plague of I-accountability, the self-congratulatory phenomenon that I was learning to associate with the increasing marketization of my university, in fact drew its narcissistic energies from the very depths of scholarly tradition? Maybe we already knew very well how to enjoy in these I-bound terms.

But that meditation requires a gloss. For the first thing to say about Lacan's theory of the "I-cracy" of university discourse is that it is not immediately obvious. We have been long accustomed to criticizing (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972) and/or defending (Giddens 1993: 47) academic discourse on the grounds of its claim to objectivity. Whereas Lacan implies that none of that really matters, that it is all

about maintaining the identity—in the etymological sense of the word, the *same-ness*—of the I.

The second thing to say is that Lacan is not alone in addressing knowledge in this fashion. They will seem strange bedfellows, but A. J. Ayer in fact has some illumination to offer here. Asking what it means to say “I know that x is the case,” Ayer argues that my claim to know anything will only be granted by others if the following three conditions are met: (a) It is true, (b) I am sure that it is true and (c) I have the right to be thus sure (Ayer 1956: 35). Ayer’s crucial point is that even though one can only be said to know something if it is actually true, an equally necessary ingredient is the subject’s possession of the right to be sure of that truth. We require that she demonstrate her right to be sure, which is to say, we require her to show that she has followed a process we recognize as valid. An example demonstrates that this is clearly the case: “If someone were fully persuaded of a mathematical proposition by a proof which could be shown to be invalid he would not...be said to know the proposition, even though it was true” (31). As this shows, even in relation to a “thoroughly” objective field like mathematics, we do not ultimately allow knowledge claims that have been propounded solely on the grounds that something is the case. Indeed, the question is only peripherally about objectivity and much more pertinently about the drama of the subject. Key to any knowledge claim is the question of whether the knower has followed a process that grants him the right to know (taking a statistically significant sample, nutting out the entire proof, assessing all the relevant literature and so on), and can demonstrate that.

But how does this amount to I-crazy?

Lacan’s claim arises as a corollary to knowledge’s predication on the right to be sure. One way to approach it is as follows: there is no way that the writer of a journal article proposing a new finding can do so without implying an identity between the I who writes and that other I who ran the lab, interviewed the subjects, read all the relevant literature, or even read all the relevant literature by the people who had themselves done all these things—that other I who has, in short, followed due process. Were that biographical identity between I-the-writer and I-the-researching-subject not implicitly upheld, the whole right to be sure would disappear. We are so used to premising our statements upon such a self-identity that we don’t see how wishful it really is, how much it ignores everything Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Lacan and others ever declared about slippage, writing, *différance* and desire, up to and including Lacan’s reminder that the word “identity” has the same root as the word “idiot”: both are founded in the Greek *ἰδιος* (*idios*), “self-same” (Lacan 2007: 71). Note how rapidly these scholars’ works have been received in these same idiotic terms, in text after text where the academic’s right to say x about, for example, Lacan is implicitly predicated on the grounds that (a) the academic has read all the relevant primary and secondary literature and (b) he

is the same as himself. Whereas any I is in truth linked to “this bastard chain of fate and inertia, of throws of the die and astonishment, of false success and missed encounters which make up the usual script of a human life” (Lacan 2007: 70). The papering over of just that condition is one way to understand what Lacan is getting at in his reference to “I-crazy,” the condition “whereby at least something is identical to itself, namely the speaker” (Lacan 2007: 63). You could also call it self-love.

I hasten to add that Lacan gives these trends a historical context lacking in Ayer. Crucial for the psychoanalyst is the act whereby René Descartes “extracted the subject” from the signifiers that course through any individual, that is, the *cogito* (Lacan 2007: 23), thereby suddenly allowing his 17th-century peers to conceive of a “subject of thinking emptied of all content” (Glynos 2002: 57). Descartes famously equated that subject with the I, and, in this fashion, “modern science was born” (Lacan 2007: 23). For such an I, regulated by a valid method but otherwise reliant on no more than the “common sense or reason” that is “naturally equal in all men” (Descartes 1968: 27), was thus licensed to eschew whole millennia of knowledge traditions in favour of the communally evaluable still-point of its own observations: *I have followed a valid method and so I, emptied of all but reason and my own identity with myself, have the right to say x is the case*. Such, Lacan would suggest, is the Cartesian discourse that has served as foundation (he refers to it, as we’ve seen, as “the myth” [Lacan 2007: 63]) for all manner of new knowledges, from algebraic geometry and Newtonian physics up to and including the contemporary social sciences and even humanities.

Mind, Descartes did at least outsource to God the function of guaranteeing the truth of the reality so revealed—for all this I-found certainty might otherwise just be an illusion sent by some “deceiver” to plague us (Descartes 2006: 35). We, on the other hand, have “foreclosed” Descartes’s divine guarantee in the centuries since, to leave ourselves in a “structural situation” whereby the scientific/scholarly I seems little differentiated in its certainty from a psychotic’s ego (Lacan 2006: 742). You could call that self-love too.

But this new quasi-psychotic mastery is by the same token a mode of impotence: the subject “extracted” for us by Descartes is a split one, rent in any given moment between conscious and unconscious signification. Such a splitting is manifested in those slips of the tongue and pen that academics conspire to ignore when alleging in any given instance: *not ownly am I saying this, I am the same as the one who urned the right to say it*. Then there is the fact that when anyone uses “I” in a sentence, he or she could just as well be speaking from an unconscious identification with a sibling, a parent or even, as in Dora’s case, Herr K. In Lacan’s words: “the ‘I’ in question is perhaps innumerable” (Lacan 2007: 65). There are, indeed, more than a few obstacles to speaking as oneself and one’s diachronic inconsistency from one day to the next is probably the least of them; the subject of our speech is split into various and inconsistent selves *in any one moment*.

The other thing Lacan makes clear is that philosophy has tended to follow a rather different path to science over these recent centuries, as the difference I alluded to some paragraphs back—the difference between reading Derrida and reading the academic on Derrida—illustrates. Nor does Lacan repudiate all power to the knowledge claims that have been, and continue to be, advanced on the I's terms. To the contrary, he sees "I-crazy," this drama of the subject, as the very engine of modern science and technology, the engine that produced the engines all around us. Turning to my own humanistic field, you just have to read some of the classics of leftist political science to appreciate the critical power of discourses propounded I-crazily. Think, too, of the I-bound and ultra-responsibilized discourse of our modern political leaders: for Lacan, I-crazy is the very form of mastery itself. Again, though, that can be a rather puny thing. Lacan's characterization of the mass of scholarly writing on Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx as a sort of "irreducibly conformist, retarded, academic recursion" suggests a continuum between scholarship and neoliberal self-report, a continuum ranging from narcissism with genuinely powerful content to narcissism alone (2007: 71). We are indeed well trained in writing essays to the auditor.

But that brings me back to the reason I invoked Lacan in the first place, to demonstrate that we academics are no strangers to the genre of self-report. Only now I want to introduce a distinction between scholarly and neoliberal accounting mechanisms, for there is indeed a difference, one the absurdities of quantification are particularly geared to highlight. I will do so via another anecdote: I know that the "A*" ("A-star") rating I have just received for publishing an article in the top tier of journals in my field is a sham. What I mean is that I know that *The International Journal of xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxx xxxxxxx xx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx* doesn't punish its authors enough to be equated with *Science* and *Nature*. Heavens above, it might actually be a "B" ("Generally, in a Tier B journal, one would expect only a few papers of very high quality.... Typical examples would be regional journals with high acceptance rates") or even (!) a "C" (Australian Research Council 2010).² The exact process by which the Australian journal rankings were drawn up has elements of secrecy about it, though it is clear that there was very little money and that it relied chiefly upon voluntary academic contribution (Genoni and Haddow 2009). One index of the latter fact is that so many Australian journals made the top two ranks of "A" and "A*," which was of course in the interests of the contributors, though hardly to be expected were the exercise conducted in, let us say, Canada. As for the extraordinary position of the journal that has just validated my existence with a star for having published in the top minuscule of journals in the world (when it is to be honest not all that different from a postgraduate publication): one can only speculate that its "*The-International-Journal-of*" title appealed to the time-strapped administrators in charge of the exercise, who could not after all deny any discipline a place at the "A*" table without irreparably damaging it. This is all funny, but it is actually about self-harm, too. I did not suffer anywhere near as much in the process of publishing there

as I did on receiving the five pages of excoriating criticisms amounting to a full-time month of rewrites from the Canadian A (no star)-ranking journal xxxxxxxx xxx xxxxxxxx xx xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx. I am accordingly finding the prospect of upcoming publication in the latter infinitely more exciting than my little star. Nor do I want to disconnect this all from the fact that I think the latter editors and referees recognized that what I was suggesting in my article was actually in some way correct. And this is as much as Bronwyn Davies and Eva Bendix Petersen point out (2005): neoliberal valorization only rarely intersects with its “client’s” desire for truth. Thence our antagonism toward this *idiocy*. We have our own forms of narcissistic validation, and they are far more real, in the psychoanalyst’s sense of the word: we suffer so much more authentically in relation to them.

The marketization of higher education has clearly elevated the fortunes of certain academics over others. Australian Education Minister John Dawkins, who in 1987 set in place the series of “reforms” that would usher in the quasi-market there, that same year proclaimed that “in a climate where resources are limited...specialized management skills are required, equivalent to any that are demanded in the private sector”; for that same reason, Dawkins found it “difficult to justify election among colleague academics as an acceptable system” (cited in Marginson 1997: 226). In arguing that “entrepreneurial academics, cultivated by government but with distinctive identities and interests” arose to fill in the gap, Simon Marginson points to the formation of the new and distinct class within the academy itself (232). The overall context of Marginson’s statement is the surprising argument that “[m]arket liberal reform did not reduce university autonomy per se” (231). What Marginson means is rather darker than it sounds: he means that these new managers took up work in the autotomizing context of neoliberal governance and so could at times even speak in opposition to government, as representatives of the quasi-entrepreneurial enterprises universities were simultaneously forced into becoming (231). I am reminded of Frantz Fanon’s searing analysis of the way the national bourgeoisie in postcolonial regimes becomes at once the voice of the independent nation and the “Western bourgeoisie’s business agent, and it will play its role without any complexes in a most dignified manner” (Fanon 1967: 122).

I believe much of the politics for academics in the current scenario will involve widening into open antagonism the relations between such “compadre colonialists” and those of us who in contrast insist that the autonomy of intellectual values is the only real form of scholarly governance. It is not as if they are hard to spot: the amount of money managerial academics now earn relative to the rest of us is as clear a caste distinction as any. Of course such distinctions are very crude. Why they are not, for all that, commonly drawn begs some questions. Are we too obsessed with being (masters of our discourse!) the same as ourselves to notice?

Notes

1. Critiques of the neoliberal state often target the belief that turning previously state-run institutions into sites of market relations will allow for more efficient and indeed democratic allocative mechanisms. But an equally important position to critique is the one that holds, as a matter of national economic survival in a changed global playing field, that it is simply no longer possible for the public to pay for its institutions. In both the triumphant and the resigned cases, the state is imagined to give way to market forces. But is this what really happens? Actually, far from eradicated, the state is regularly *presupposed* in projects to commodify public sector services. The voucher system currently being introduced into Australian higher education, for instance, pegs government block funding for each respective institution to student application for enrolment, so allowing that form of consumer choice to determine resource allocation. Yet far from withering in the face of this new “market,” the state is there to fund every purchase within it. One sees a similar aping of market mechanisms, and a similarly massive state presence upholding the effort to do so, behind the “markets” in research goods that various governments have recently instituted. Guy Redden is scathing on the deformities introduced by the British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which he defines as “quasi-market that revolves around the idea that imitating market instrumentalism leads to an improvement in the delivery of the public good,” adding that “it is at least as logical to view it as the importation of market failure into the public sector” (Redden 2008: 6). The distinction between it and normal market failure is, of course, the massive presence of the state to keep the show on the road. But even in markets that do function in the relative absence of what we might term “the visible hand of neoliberalism” (that is, the at-times bankrolling and ever-auditing state), there are serious questions about whether educational goods amount to genuine commodities. The latter, Simon Marginson reminds us, are “scarce at any moment in time, but availability can be increased through growth in production” (which explains why one might make a claim as to the market’s democratizing powers on their basis) (Marginson 1997: 39). “Positional goods” like university degrees, on the other hand, are “scarce in absolute terms,” and that is by their very nature (39): your degree from Harvard achieves a great part of its economic value by dint of the fact that the vast majority of other degree-holders don’t have one. It offers you a position in a hierarchical order and in fact requires the maintenance of that zero-sum hierarchy to retain its value. Among the paradoxes of marketization in a field geared more to the production of positional than standard commodities is that more intense competition among institutions “does not necessarily lead to greater efficiency or heightened customer awareness” (45). Marketizing education is far more likely to strengthen the relative position of elite producers, simply because they have long-storied names, “thus further insulating them from market pressures” (45). Marginson underlines this by pointing to the extraordinary fact that the Ivy League has not changed its basic composition since the 1920s (250)! To bring this all back to the Australian scene, viz. the above-mentioned voucher system, the combination of state intervention and positional good amounts to a market that is not one, being fabricated so as to sell a commodity that is not really one either, and further impeding democratic access to elite institutions in the process. I am reminded of nothing so much as Moishe Postone’s description of Eastern bloc communism as “the most rigid, vulnerable and oppressive form of state-interventionist capitalism” (Postone 1993: 14). But another way of putting the above comments is that we have not sufficiently focused on the theme of the neoliberal economist’s *creativity*. Milton Friedman’s proposal that public funding of higher education take the form of a voucher system was, in 1962, a genuine conceptual innovation. It was “difficult to implement, but it opened a door in the imagination” (Marginson 1997: 90)—no one had thought, prior to then, that you could model public sector education in terms of “individualized consumption and production” (100). A focus on the literally imaginative power of such agents helps us to keep two important things in mind: the first is that even though an invention like the Friedmanite voucher system has come

to seem “a necessary, even wholly natural way for the social order to be regulated” (Harvey 2005: 41) in present-day Australia, it is about as necessary and natural as the genre of science fiction; the second thing such a focus puts in mind is a question, to be asked of all such “quasi-market” mechanisms up to and including the neoliberal self-report sparking this article: are they even capitalist?

2. The state’s criteria for “A*” journals, on the other hand, bespeak the bibliometrician’s Babelian ambition to measure scholarly narcissism itself! “Virtually all papers they publish will be of a very high quality. These are journals where most of the work is important (it will really shape the field) and where researchers *boast* about getting accepted” (Australian Research Council 2010, emphasis added).

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