Tactics of resistance in academic work

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Abstract:
This paper explores tactics of resistance in academic work. The focus of the paper is humanities and social sciences in New Zealand universities and, in particular, responses to managerial strategies unleashed by the Performance Based Research Fund. Academics are increasingly subjected to ‘discourses of character’ (Casey, 1995) as new technologies of control are deployed. Their response’s can be understood as examples of ‘tactics of resistance’ and a typology of such is offered.

Introduction
Several years ago Noble and Lupton (1998) published Consuming work: Computers, subjectivity and appropriation in the university workplace, in which they addressed issues of subjectivity, identity and new technologies in ‘a university in Sydney’. The focus of their research was the introduction of personal computers and the ways employees consumed and reshaped these technologies to their own devices. Noble and Thompson were seeking to address complaints by Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) and other scholars to the effect that the approaches drawn from the 1960s and 1970s - Braverman (1974), Burawoy (1979) and Foucault (1979)- assumed managerial control and marginalised resistance. Noble and Lupton looked to Paul du Gay (1996) and ‘consumption-based analysis’ as a way forward from this impasse. Du Gay borrowed from de Certeau (1984), in particular, the distinction of strategies and tactics to differentiate the making up of employees at work ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ (making do. This paper follows in the footsteps of Noble and Lupton (1998), while being mindful that in the context of ubiquitous computing the PC is no longer a novel
consumer-item and tactics of bracketing this technology (to preserve traditional work-home boundaries, for instance) are no longer effective. Rather academics can be thought of as early examples of cyborg workers (Bogard 1996).

Academics are understood as besieged: the victims of the degradation of work noted by Braverman (1974) and the labour process tradition; and the diminution of self bemoaned by Marcuse, (1964), Foucault (1979), Hochschild (1983), Kunda (1992), Casey (1995), Sennett (1998) and others. For example, the boundaries between work and home that Lupton and Noble discuss have –for most academics- long since been transgressed. Indeed academics have much in common with cyborg workers and as such are susceptible to forms of ‘hypersurveillant control’ (Bogard 1996: 4. As yet there are no accounts of academics ‘wet wired’ into the technology but they are nevertheless thoroughly implicated in their own surveillance. The case presented here involves a qualitative increase in the surveillance and technologically-mediated control of New Zealand university staff in the wake of the Performance Based Research Fund, a research assessment introduced in 2003 (Curtis and Matthewman, 2005; Curtis and Phibbs, 2006; Web Research, 2004). The focus is academics in the humanities and social sciences in the eight New Zealand universities. At the same time, it is suggested that critical theory finds itself in an impasse, insofar as can be described in terms of psychoanalytical and labour process traditions or poles. De Certeau is proposed as offering, modest, benefits to both traditions. His oeuvre is not immediately amenable to social scientists, is deliberately delimiting, but provides insights into a social phenomenology of everyday life.

**The Performance Based Research Fund**

The development of the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) is one example of how the Fifth Labour Government has deployed a thirdway rhetoric during its first two terms of office, in part to distance itself from an earlier fascination with markets and contractualism and to ease the burden of legitimating a competitive model within education and more broadly (Robertson & Dale, 2000. A number of thirdway initiatives have been trialled in health, education and the social services (Chatterjee, 1999; Craig, 2003; Dalziel, 2001. These initiatives underscore a dilemma facing the Labour Government, in that it wishes to avoid the spectre of transforming the extant policy and
legislative framework while perforce making accommodation for the cumulative failings of the market-led approach (Easton, 1999; Kelsey 2002. Education, especially higher education, is currently an important focus of thirdway initiatives (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Roberts, 2006; Smith 2005. Hence, the Tertiary Education Strategy: 2002-2007 and, in particular, the PBRF epitomises new state interventions and forms of institution-building that Peck and Tickell (2002) associate with ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism. At base these third way initiatives ameliorate market failures the results of an earlier phase of neoliberalism (Easton, 2002).

More specifically, the PBRF modifies a quasi-market in higher education, created by the funding of the institutions of higher education on the basis of equivalent full time student enrolments (EFTS. The EFTS system was introduced by the Fourth Labour Government and the 1989 Review of Post-Compulsory Education and Training (the Hawke Report) the main marker of this realignment of higher education with the market-led ethos (Hawke, 1989, Kelsey, 1995; Richards, 2003. Universities and polytechnics were then encouraged by neoliberal policy and funding shifts to compete for students (Easton, 2002. The development of an EFTS-based quasi-market in education undoubtedly stimulated competition for students, but recently it has been argued that this form of funding has encouraged isomorphism in higher education -particularly the proliferation of low quality programmes and courses by TEOs in search of student enrolments (see Ministry of Education, 2004. The EFTS or market-led approach is now regarded as overly competitive and, most damningly, insensitive to quality. In contrast, the Tertiary Education Strategy: 2002-2007 emphasizes the synergistic benefits of an educational hierarchy, at least when expressed as collaboration between TEOs and the differentiation of these institutions in terms of quality and capacity (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2005. It is argued that a focus on EFTS marginalises quality and that the best measure for such quality at the institutional level can be found in the research outputs of academics. Thus the PBRF is an important marker in yet another shift in policy and signals the operationalisation of direct state oversight in funding allocations to TEOs (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004a, 2004b. With this shift comes a qualitative increase in the surveillance and technologically-mediated control of New Zealand university staff insofar
as the research outputs of individual staff are now subject to external calculation and linked to government funding (through the PBRF).

**Tactics of resistance**

Michele de Certeau is an attractive figure as much for his restrictions as despite it (Ahearne, 1995. De Certeau was not primarily a theorist of organizations and work but an interpreter of life practices (‘reading, talking, walking, dwelling, cooking, etc.’) and specifically of lost and unknowable lives. As a heuristic device he made the distinction between strategies and tactics (de Certeau 1984: xviii-xix. Strategies are the domain of the powerful, the calculation of power relationships made possible at soon as a powerful subject can be isolated. Strategies constitute a triumph of ‘place over time’. They allow the powerful to capitalize on their advantages and, on this basis, to plan ahead. The possession of an autonomous place allows the powerful mastery through sight (panopticon. Thus observation is the basis of objectification and control. In contrast tactics are ‘an art of the weak’. Tactics are opportunistic, occur in the full glare of the panopticon, and cannot retain what they win. “a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances” (de Certeau 1984: xix. In work, tactics of resistance take the form of *la perruque*. “*La perruque* grafts itself onto the system of the industrial assembly line (its counterpoint, in the same place), as a variant of the activity which, outside the factory (in another place), takes the form of *bricolage*” (de Certeau, 1984: 29. Such ‘making do’ is the art of the possible in work and in life (see also, Bogard 1996; Du Gay 1996. Bogard (1996) suggests that *la perruque* constitutes a simulation, indistinguishable from work by all observable characteristics –as indeed it must in order to endure.

**Methods and la perruque**

The formulation of tactics of resistance / *la perruque* poses a methodological problem for social scientists. “He [de Certeau] shows how the learned interpretative concern with what remains ‘implicit’ as a kernel of truth in its uninformed ‘other’ is directed from within by forces and dispositions which themselves have not been fully explicated. This
raises supplementary problems for a hermeneutics of the other from which Certeau himself simply cannot escape (Ahearne 1995: 61. More prosaically, how best to study the simulation of work—practices of masking, feints, decoys, improvisation, meaning and looking busy?

This study examines the playing out of *la perruque* in everyday life, specifically in the practices of New Zealand academics in the humanities and social sciences. Perhaps the most straightforward definition provided by de Certeau for such tactics is ‘the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer’ (1984: 25. However *la perruque* is a challenge for investigation precisely because such practices are liminal. Bogard emphasizes this marginality: ‘De Certeau reminds us that wherever the effort to command a space of activity by means of its *exposure* has developed, there has evolved, alongside and against it, an art of inhabiting those “no places”, those inscrutable free zones where the watchers are blind, the authorities powerless to act, those spaces “outside time” the resist the imposed directionality of the temporal order and seek to create a separate, free, “timeless time”’ (Bogard 1996: 94. Such ‘making do’ is the art of the possible in work and in life (see Du Gay 1996. Bogard (1996) suggests that *la perruque* constitutes a simulation, indistinguishable from work by all observable characteristics—as indeed it must in order to endure. As a consequence the investigation, exposure by different means, of no places and timeless time must rely on methods that are intuitive and interpretive.

This case study combined three methods: a survey of academics in the humanities and social sciences (*n* = 617) (Curtis and Matthewman, 2005; Curtis and Phibbs, 2006), around 30 interviews with participants in the survey and other staff, participant observation— in the form of my own experiences as an academic, ’PBRF coordinator’ for the Faculty of Arts, University of Auckland, and head of department. On the one hand the approach used can be understood as an example of what Howard Becker categorised as analytical induction. On the other, the nature of *la perruque* demands a approach that reveals the subject through an examination of its boundary conditions.

Previously Noble and Lupton (1998) examined these practices in an academic context, paying attention to the appropriation by staff of their personal computer through semi-
structured interviews [confessions] with 40 staff at ‘a university in Sydney’. Investigations of *la perruque* are not unproblematic and while Noble and Lupton were content to interview current staff, Anteby (forthcoming) interviewed retirees of a manufacturing concern and was greeted with ‘giggles, silences and denials’ in exploring tactics of resistance – notably the practice of ‘homers’. Anteby simultaneously examined the boundary conditions of *la perruque* through the examination of ‘legal traces’, representing court cases in French and Canadian jurisdictions brought by employers against employees for forms of theft, including ‘typing of a personal memorandum during company time’ etc.. These traces provide an understanding of the context of surveillance and some measure of the limits of success of the panopticon.

The closed and open-end questions in my survey provided clear indication of dislike among academics for creeping managerialism and constitute an important trace. Thus, 503 of the 617 respondents answered the questions ‘The most worrying developments for the tertiary sector are:’ and ‘The most encouraging developments for the tertiary sector are:’ Respondents were provided with three sections of three lines for each question. The most common set of phrases referred to a dislike of management, managerialism and managers: 6 of these responses were made in the ‘encouraging’ section; 98 in the ‘worrying’ section. These results, indicating at a potential for resistance, provided the context for interviews. As was the case described by Anteby, these interviews only rarely took the form of a confessional, rather they were suggestive a range of approaches to making do.

**Four tactics of resistance**

The technologically-mediated nature of academic work is now a given. An issue facing academic work is the extent to which it survives as a special case within the domain of cyborg work (Bogard 1996: 104. These technologies of control are the main levers available to senior management in universities for the development of a more corporate culture –alongside, of course, the possibilities for restructuring and redundancies made possible by chronic budget ‘crises’. The drive to corporatize the academy comes precisely at the moment when academics are irredeemably implicated in technologies that enhance surveillance while enabling new forms of scholarship. The roll-out of corporate culture
parallels that of technology. The ideal academic is increasingly that described by Casey’s (1995) corporatist ‘discourse of character’: diligent, dedicated and loyal; adaptable, team-player; self-controlled.

The drive for managerial control in the academy is not a given. Four tactics of resistance on the part of academics are discernible as mechanisms for making do. As de Certeau noted, these tactics occur in the glare of the panopticon, specifically the new managerialism invigorated by the PBRF processes (Curtis and Matthewman, 2005. The ‘no-place’ and ‘timeless time’ they inhabit is bounded by contesting mangerialist goals, increasing audit culture and technological innovation in the form of staff reporting. La perruque is primarily about stealing meaning and time this takes place in the context of, or at least what academics perceive to be, the intensification of work and decline of traditional forms of professionalism. As such they focus on the gaps and spaces within the multiple processes of surveillance and intensification mandated by HR and line management. Arguably the inclusive character of new managerialism generates its own mixed messages which, in turn, provides limited and temporary capacity for academics to eschew otherwise mandated processes and outputs.

The tactics of resistance suggested / exposed through the mixed methods described briefly above are presented below as a simple 2 x 2 typology. The axes of this typology are drawn from de Certeau’s interest in everyday practices that are both mundane and liminal. Casey’s (1995, 1999, 2002, 2004) psychoanalytical accounts of ambivalence in corporate culture provides the inspiration for one pole, demarcated as active and passive presentations of self. The other pole is firmly entrenched in the categorisations associated with accounts of control over the labour process (see Knights and McCabe, 2000) and in particular in the scope of academic professions (Halsey, 1992.
### Table 1: A typology of tactics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Presentation of Self</th>
<th>Advancing Professional Control</th>
<th>Ceding Professional Control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEGITIMATE IGNORANCE</td>
<td>Deflects intensification by prioritisation of authorised goals.</td>
<td>IN THE MIX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bracketing of managerialism (e.g., black boxing of technology.</td>
<td>Diffuses intensification by pursuit of all authorised goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive Presentation of Self</td>
<td>MENTOR YOU: MENTOR ME</td>
<td>SELF WORK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delays intensification by initiatives to build capacity.</td>
<td>Defers and subverts intensification by reflection and self-reporting (i.e., minimal outputs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Accepts and actions invitation to teambuilding, inter-disciplinarity, networking and mentoring. Retains peer review.</td>
<td>Accepts and actions invitation to self-audit, to internalise and resolve the dilemmas of contesting managerialist goals. Abandons peer review.</td>
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### Legitimate ignorance:

Legitimate ignorance is the most common and most active tactic adopted by academics and takes the form of a one-sided appreciation of the priorities delivered by management. It allows the individual to bracket any one of the three dimensions of academic work: research, teaching and service – most commonly the latter. These dimensions typically co-exist a priorities in the same form as the game ‘scissors-stone-paper’. Playing the legitimate ignorance game allows the individual to eschew –at least temporarily- the least preferred dimension with the justification of working toward the greater and individual good.
For example, this tactic is enabled precisely by the rush to management information systems that have tended to ‘black box’ displaced paper-based processes for student admission and enrolment. A working knowledge of the university Calendar and of the regulations found therein was previously regarded as a requirement of academic life (more or less) and the wholesale enrolment of students into courses, using paper forms and rubber stamps, as a rite of passage. No more. Contemporary academics declare such administrative work is tiresome and not in line with the more important focus on research and / or teaching. Like all tactics of the weak this is a double-edged sword. While mixed messages from senior management open up spaces for la perruque in the form of selectivity of work focus, it also permanently narrows the range of activities available to academics insofar as general staff –under the direction of senior management- tend to colonise these areas. When applied to the avoidance of teaching or research activity this type of double movement also increases the potential for their separation by the mechanism of employment contracts (a development most New Zealand academics are strongly opposed to (Curtis and Matthewman, 2005; Curtis and Phibbs, 2006).

**In the mix**

This tactic cedes academic claims to professional control and seemingly accepts the guidance from senior and line managers regarding the pursuit of appropriate goals. However the abandonment of peer review effectively buffers the academic self, insofar as the wholesale (that is, academically non-prioritised) pursuit of managerial initiatives is hard to distinguish from busy work and tends to substitute process for outputs. Such busy work arguably has its clearest expression in the new fascination with writing proposals for funded research. Writing research proposals and grant applications is on the face of it a fairly forlorn activity for the majority of academic staff in the humanities and social sciences – given their low success rate. However, such is the current fascination with external funding that a number of universities are now paying staff for unsuccessful applications. This is surely the simulation of work made real (Bogard, 1996.

It is hardly surprising that while the tactic of ‘legitimate ignorance’ is more closely aligned with long-serving and senior academics, ‘in the mix’ appears as the default position of new hirings. Perhaps it reflects an assessment that professional control on the
part of academic is already a relic and that the best that can be secured is individualistic responses (Halsey, 1992).

**Mentor you: mentor me**

Instruction in the new forms of corporate culture and taking personal responsibility for the implementation of that vision is an important element of the new managerialism in universities. The PBRF has unleashed a flurry of senior management initiatives to not only ‘pick winners’ among academics and academics units, but to provide instruction to staff, effectively on techniques of self-audit and self-improvement. New staff, young staff, Maori staff and Pasifika staff, women and professors are invited by senior and line management to get involved in forms of interaction and building community that are wholly new to the academy. Much of this is indeed the simulation of family (Casey, 1999. However, it also offers a rich seam for the simulation of work and is for sustained periods indistinguishable from actual work.

Hence, this tactic putatively advances claims to professional expertise and control (that is, peer review) over the dimensions of academic work (research, teaching and service) while apparently accepting the need for an internalisation of new, corporate values. The response can be gauged by a ready acceptance of mentoring initiatives, teambuilding, inter-disciplinary networks and other scheduled talk-fests. The tactic appears particularly attractive to female academics and must at least in part be understood as a response to the structural disadvantages experienced by women, particularly in the realm of academic publication (Curtis and Phibbs, 2006.

**Self work**

Each of the other three tactics sketched above hinge on advancing some sets of claims to professional control over academic work and / or to individualistic opportunism. ‘Self work’ is the apparent negation of these claims and the apparent acceptance of both audit and internalisation. Membership of this category are both ‘bewitched’ (Knights and McCabe, 2000) and have internalised the demands of managerialism / corporate culture (Casey, 1999. Academic readers may be encouraged that the tactic is included here as a category rather than as a set of empirical practices.
Conclusion

The resolution of challenges determined by senior management necessitates a number of mixed messages. Indeed, mixed messages lie at the heart of change management and the intensification of work: the focus is on more research outputs, the focus in on greater external research funding, the focus is on greater student enrolments / capping student numbers, more overseas (full fee paying) students, more graduate students, more PhDs, more ‘buy-outs’ from teaching / less ‘buy-outs from teaching, more contract teaching and research / less contract teaching and research (Curtis and Matthewman, 2005. These mixed messages provide openings or temporary times and spaces for la perruque in academic life.

References


