

“The Passion to do it”: Exposing Academia’s Love Affair with Neoliberalism

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Abstract: The discourses of ‘passionate’ and ‘autonomous’ scholarship through which academics account for their attraction to academe and their motivations responsabilise staff for their fortunes. The popular conception of academic work as ‘passionate’ labour frames academics’ search for stability and meaning within the neoliberal logic of the enterprising, responsible self. Whereas neoliberal universities value academic labour where it can demonstrably contribute to corporate and national strategic objectives, ‘passion’ emerges from within academic speech communities as a means to both produce a common experience of academic labour and normalise an expectation of passionate scholarship. Because it is defined as a personal quality, ‘passion’ individualises the acceptance what is endured in the name of what is desired. Drawing on original qualitative interviews, this paper explores how Australian academics account for their passion for academic work. The exposure of, and reflection upon, the relationship between our ethical self-construction and broader structural circumstances is a promising tool to engage in a cultural critique of precarious employment in academia.

Key Words: Academic Governance; Discourse Analysis; Neoliberalism; Passion; Precarity

Autonomy in the Neoliberal University

The Foucauldian conceptualisation of neoliberalism as a political rationality has advanced sociological understandings of academic labour in recent years. Scholarship sparked from sociological expositions of this political rationality has revealed a diffuse and highly flexible mode of reasoning (Miller and Rose 2008: 80). In *Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education*, Steven Ward (2012) outlines the political manoeuvring of higher education into international conversations about the future of global economies. The OECD, Ward claims, has been a prolific tool for encouraging national governments to manage higher education and construct policy papers that would reform higher education globally during the 1980s and 1990s (Ward 2012: 142-143; also see Henry *et al.* 2001). Through interpreting de-industrialising economies as evidence of the emergence of a new information society, permeated by knowledge-based economies, the discourses that crystallised in OECD forums and reports

suggested that to harness the economic value of knowledge, it might be necessary “to modify or reject the idea that science is a public good”.

The increasing importance of international higher education markets to academic governance has had a lasting impact on the higher education sector in Australia (Lewis 2013). New Managerialism (or New Public Management) has played a key role in legitimising the restructuring of relationships of power and authority within universities. As Jenny Lewis (2013: 3) comments,

The vast majority of higher-education literature since the 1980s has argued that the days of academic oligarchy have been left behind. Increasing marketization, accompanied by stronger state interventions has reduced the autonomy of both universities and the individuals that work within them.

Managerial governance transforms the relationship of academic staff to their labour by governing the direction of research and teaching ‘at a distance’ (Miller and Rose 2008: 34) and often through competitive criteria such as ‘excellence’ and ‘innovation’ (Cannizzo, forthcoming). Through aligning the interests of academic staff with the corporate objectives of university management, institutions elicit a degree of compliance from academic staff, appealing to their individual self-interests (see Bansel and Davies 2010).

Governance of universities through the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) share between them an interest in both the quality and accountability of academic goods and services, enacting what Cooper and Poletti (2011: 57) have described as a ‘culture of audit’ in Australian universities. This culture trickles down through line management and performance evaluation, placing expectation on the conduct of academic staff. In the UK, an audit culture has pervaded higher education governance since the implementation of the Research Assessment Exercises in 1992, which Docherty (2012: 49) argues have seen academics transformed into ‘human resources in the advancement of government strategy’. Additionally, Sayer claims that the RAE encourages universities to game their assessments towards producing winners through filtering out potential low-scoring research (Sayer 15 December 2014, 2015).

The institutionalisation of external interests over the content and organisation of academia have impacted academic freedom. The ideal of curiosity-driven research is placed in jeopardy within funding allocation systems which shift attention away from what is interesting to what are safe, fundable topics (Lewis 2013: 71). The gaming of academic research funding through initiatives such as the ERA as well as competitive research and teaching grants have serious implications for academic motivation and career expectations. At least in the short term, as Cooper and Poletti (2011: 63) have argued, neoliberal modes of academic government threaten to create a schism between those who can entertain notions of resisting managerial imperatives, and those establishing careers or on the cusp of academia, who struggle to maintain a sense of legitimacy and appeal to performance evaluation criteria to secure their academic identities. Research from the UK by both Kolsaker (2008) and Deem (2004) suggest that the relationship between academic identities and managerial modes of government are far from unidimensional, with Kolsaker (2008: 522) reporting participants in her study re-aligning their professional identities with managerial norms, providing mutual legitimacy for both academics and managerial modes of governance.

What is absent from most past research is an analysis of the cultural dynamics through which ideals about academic labour are formed, reproduced and transformed alongside formal institutional structures (such as bureaucracies and quasi-markets) and neoliberal policies. It is my contention that there are wide-reaching discursive strategies which academics draw upon to explain their relationship to their labour which are individualising, as opposed to the communal

ideals of academic 'tribes and territories' (Becher and Trowler 1989) and are perceived as emerging from personal inclinations, as opposed to systematic policy initiatives.

A Discourse of Passion

The analysis to follow is compiled from interview data collected in a study of the personal histories, career ambitions and expectations of 29 Australian academic staff between March and July in 2014. As a sample group of the larger Australian population, these staff members were roughly evenly spread across eight Australian universities, three Group of Eight research-intensive universities, two universities who are members of the Australian Technologies Network, and three regionally-based universities. There was a mixture of contract types, though most participants were hired on an ongoing basis, with a third (n=9) on fixed-term research contracts, and they were distributed across career stages, from Early to Late Career. In order to achieve a broad range of views on academic career expectations and ambitions, the project aimed to purposely achieve an even distribution of male and female participants and to recruit participants from across both the social sciences and biological sciences. Participants were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews about academic governance, their career plans and topical issues such as the utility of performance development for academic staff. Participants are referred to through pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Through asking participants to account for their entry into academia and their ambitions for the future, my interviews elicited a range of common events, narrative tropes and discursive constructs which academic staff used to describe their experiences. Of particular interest in investigating the effects that neoliberal reforms have on academic labour, I sought to discern how academics speak about their motivations for engaging with academic work. Academics' narratives of their journey into academia often drew on accounts of the discovery of the 'intrinsic satisfactions' (Spurling 2012) that various forms of academic labour offered them. Academics' desires for engagement with scholarship was often expressed in the familiar language of 'passion' and a 'love' for academic work. For example, when asked how she would describe working in academia one participant, Jacinta, replied:

Passion is a word I think of a lot. Passion. You have to have the passion to do it I guess. Passion around your discipline as well. And that helps you drive through all the crappy bits. And [academia is] quite flexible. Certainly after working in the real world and coming into here, the flexibility and independence I have is above and beyond anything that I've ever had before and I find that quite empowering I guess. (Jacinta, Lecturer in Social Sciences)

Jacinta's reflection here is typical of many of the uses of 'passion' within my interviews with academics. The claim to be a passionate scholar or desire to experience passionate scholarship across universities and disciplines suggests that the discourse of 'passion' may be common parlance within a broad academic 'speech community' (Bloor and Bloor 2007: 9). However, for some academics 'passion' also carried a moral overtone. When asked what makes a successful social scientist, one Professor commented:

For young starting poor bastards going into the field, you've got to love what you do. You've got to have a passion for it. If you're bored shitless by what you're doing you'll never be any good at it. So you've really got to love it. And you've got to have something that is always intellectually demanding. If it's something that you can do flying on the seat of your pants, then it's not worth doing. It's got to be hard. It's got to be really hard, but they've got to be intellectual problems that you think you can solve and that you think you know how to at least address. [...] I think that's crucial. (Brett, Professor in Social Sciences)

Passion is a central concept for understanding how academics present their relationship with their labour amongst peer groups. There are four key features which distinguish the use of 'passion' as a discourse about academic work.

Firstly, of the staff I spoke to who described their relationship with their work in terms of a deep love or passion, most drew upon a common narrative trope of discovery. This discovery does not allude to the foundation of new knowledge within a disciplinary area, but rather a discovery about the self as a subject of its desires. For example, one participant recounts her journey into the biological sciences:

I had originally wanted to be a vet and I actually got accepted into a vet program at [a university] in my second year in Science but by then I realised that I didn't just want to be doing basic vet stuff. Instead of just wanting to use other people's knowledge, I wanted to make knowledge. When I was looking at animals and understanding the physiology and animal communities, I liked parasites because while all the big animals were cute, they kept going extinct. Parasites speciate and they wipe out whole human populations and animal populations and we can't beat them. I mean, look around at what's happening to malaria. To me, they were the quintessential Aussie battler or the little guy and I always go for the little guy. (Whitney, Senior Lecturer in Biological Sciences)

The discovery that Whitney recounts is the discovery of desire, of not wanting to do 'basic vet stuff', and of coming to understand a truth about herself. The trope of discovery personalises our interactions with what are otherwise highly impersonal methods of thinking – the scientific method, critique, or other formal reasoning.

A second feature of the discourse of passion is its referential flexibility. Passion does not refer to a specific signified phenomenon, but rather acts as an empty shell which may encase a range of objects towards which passion is directed. Participants expressed passionate attachment to a range of academic activities, including 'teaching', 'research', disciplinary practices and modes of investigation, the idea of critiquing social institutions, and helping disadvantaged or ill individuals through their academic practice. The act of declaring passionate attachment to an aspect of academic work plays an important role here in legitimising academics' specialisation into disciplines and roles within the academic enterprise.

Thirdly, the claim to be passionate warrants authentication itself: that is, in our interviews, staff members often attempted to offer rationalisations and justifications for their passionate attachment. These explanations of passion were framed as cognitive, rational responses by the individual to their self-management with an awareness of their inner desires. For example, one participant, describing his passion for his research work, stated:

I like to be involved in academic things and I like to be involved in research because research is fun. It's the best thing about being an academic. If you don't want to do research, become a high school teacher. That's it at the end of the day. An academic should be doing a bit of research. It's like a Marxian alienation thing: if you're not doing the research I think you're alienated from what you're doing. I'm not experiencing alienation because I'm doing my research and I love doing my research. (Thomas, Professor in the Social Sciences)

Thomas expresses an ethical dimension to the discourse of passion when he states that he loves research and that he is therefore doing his research. Furthermore, Thomas implies that the labour he enjoys is vital to the work of an academic and authenticates his claim to wanting to be something other than 'a high school teacher', which implies no interest in research. The authentication of passion also can also act to legitimate one's being as an academic and attest to an appropriate mode of relating to one's work.

A final feature of the claim to be passionate is that it is often accompanied by the claim that the passionate academic experiences academic work as part of a broader understanding of themselves – as a lifestyle. As one participant claimed:

I guess I figured out pretty early that I wanted to do academic work and for me that is as much research as it is about teaching. I know academics prioritise these things differently, but for me teaching is a very central part of this kind of lifestyle. And it is a lifestyle. It's not nine to five

by any stretch. It's something that can be very hard not to do once you get started. (Vincent, Lecturer in the Social Sciences)

Vincent expresses an expectation of the 'passionate' academic here: that they should not only expect to integrate their work time into non-standard hours, but also may be driven towards this 'lifestyle'. By claiming to be passionate about some aspect of academic work, academic staff subjectivate themselves within a discourse of passion, both leveraging 'passion' to fulfil a function within conversation and also positioning themselves as rational and thoughtful selves in relation to their choice to pursue a career in academia.

A Market for Passionate Subjectivities?

When contextualised within our present Australian and international higher education markets, the passionate academic interfaces the individual choices of staff members with potentially precarious employment conditions. As a successful individual, who has recognised their internal motivations (for research, critique, teaching, etcetera) and negotiated the academic environment in order to find a role which enables their passion, academics normalise individualising accounts of their successes. The subject of the passionate academic is parallel here to Miller and Rose's (2008: 195) account of the 'enterprising self': a self-managing individual who is 'striving to improve the 'quality of life' for themselves and their families through the choices that they make within the marketplace of life'. Accounting for the successful communion of staff members and their work roles in terms of individual choice overlooks the limited resources which enable or constrain the achievement of passionate devotion to academic work. Reporting on a survey of casual Australian academics, May *et al.* (2013: 18-19) claim that casually-employed academics often see their employment status as a temporary stage from which they hope to transition into an ongoing contract. Despite being a minority preference, casual academic work now shapes the opportunities available to a growing percentage of the university workforce (Bexley, Arkoudis and James 2013; Ryan *et al.* 2013). The assumption that 'passionate' academics seek to integrate their work and non-work lives, devoting unpaid time in pursuit of one's passion, disadvantages casually-employed staff.

The discourse of passion exposed here enables the subjectivation of academic staff members within conversations with peers and – through expectations of reciprocity – acts to legitimise the passionate academic as an entrepreneur of their selves. The degree to which the discourse of passion has become normalised within academic speech communities suggests a strong willingness to account for not only meritocratic achievement, but also for the satisfaction and frustrations that are experienced within the structures of academia. For an academic sector increasingly characterised by precarious and non-preferential employment contracts, the continued championing of an individualistic, enterprising image of the passionate academic may act to further silence less privileged academic workers as ungrateful or worse – passionless.

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