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MEDITATION

No wonder!

Kingship and the everyday at the Max Planck Society

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Comment on “Academic precarity as hierarchical dependence in the Max Planck Society” by Vita Peacock, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2016.

Despite anthropologists’ interest in labor and the dearth of research on the complex forms of exploitation produced by late capitalism, there has been a marked reluctance to turn our gaze upon our own working conditions.

Perhaps because of academics’ passionate attachment to their work and the continued perception of their privileged position in the scholarly ivory tower, very few studies have dared considering them as a group worth of anthropological inquiry.¹ Vita Peacock’s sophisticated analysis of hierarchy, precarity, and dependence at the Max Planck Society (MPS) provides some crucial insights on the complex relations of knowledge production in one of the most prestigious research institutions in Germany.

By contrast with studies that seek to trace local receptions of neoliberalism (Ong 2006), the originality of Peacock’s argument is to locate precarity at the MPS in a historically specific trajectory in the German academia—i.e., in an older tradition of intellectual leadership embodied in its century-old “director-led” model. In my view, the notion of “kingship” on which Peacock builds her argument convincingly captures the power dynamics at stake within the Max Planck system. While

1. An exemplary exception may be found in David Graeber’s analysis of the professionalization of academia and what he has called “vulgar Foucauldianism” (2014: 84).



producing multilayered forms of dependence, the MPS director-led model greatly differs from the liberal ethos of innovation guiding contemporary research initiatives in the rest of Europe. If the neoliberal ideology tends to shape specific subjectivities (self-driven, competitive, and even egocentric at times) as a result of the casualization of labor, the hegemony of the MPS director triggers different kinds of aporia with almost diametrically opposite consequences.

In Peacock's perspective, the condition of absolute dependence to the "Director-King" in which researchers are maintained is produced dialectically. Embedded within a culturally specific state of hierarchical solidarity, dependence is part of a moral universe whereby the life of the community is equated with the life of the academic sovereign. Hence, the real social effect of the arbitrary belief in somebody's power is what creates power as a moral reality in the first place. The belief in the sovereign's divine power, as Valerio Valeri (1985) suggests, prompts many people to become his vassals in order to benefit from his power and this, in return, reinforces the king's capacity to deliver what his reputation promises.

Trained in the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition where personal pursuit is encouraged, my discovery of this monarchic form of hierarchy through my two-year-long post-PhD involvement with the Institute for Social Anthropology was rapidly marked by an acute awareness of the necessity to manage my relationship with the sovereign Director. In this sense, Peacock is right to conceive dependence in the MPS system as a hierarchical relation allowing a specific "mode of action." The three examples of tactics developed by researchers to navigate the system illustrate her point particularly well. However, her account leaves the affective dimension of hierarchical dependence somewhat in the background. To me, what this situation of dependence provoked was an overwhelming feeling of boredom triggered by the necessity to follow the motions of the machine without any possibility to expand the horizon of imagination delineated by the director. "Subsumed within the [director's] broad vision" (this issue, pg. 98), researchers had to constantly wait for the king's green light before initiating any project. In spite of the director's alleged desire to remain accessible—leaving her office door visibly open when she was present at the Institute—meetings were regularly postponed and rescheduled to accommodate her own agenda, forcing researchers and visitors to wait for long hours in the corridors. Ironically, many of us found ourselves in the same position as the character waiting in front of the "Gate of Law" in Kafka's novel *The Trial*: the director's door was foreclosed by its—illusionary, and allegedly academically egalitarian—openness.

An emblematic feature of the monarchical community form constructed around the position of the sovereign director, this permanent state of "waitness" could also be interpreted as an instrument of conservative governmentality (Hage 2009). Instead of attempting to resist the various forces that had cast them aside in the knowledge factory, researchers' capacity to endure the wait was indirectly celebrated as the "heroism of the stuck," almost as a "sign of nobility of spirit" (Hage 2009: 101). The direct effect of this structure of feeling was to renew a sense of the collective among those maintained in this ambivalent form of passivity. The emotional glue that kept together the community of researchers was surprisingly less made of a common passion for a discipline than of a shared experience of stuntedness. In an attempt to delegitimize and tame impatience and the desire to be disruptive, what was implicitly celebrated was restraint, self-control, self-government: prescriptions



that colluded to accentuate boredom. Feelings of intense irritation for being required to remain “within” were slowly transformed into sentiments of inertia and inaction as researchers’ compliance was enforced by the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) of a better future at the end of their long wait.

Remaining within the limits of what was expected also meant that there was no place for surprise, poetic imagination, enchantment, or puzzlement—i.e., no place for the kind of stamina that had guided my work so far. More disturbing even: an institution supposedly renowned for its scientific excellence had indirectly banned the wondrous mindset that underpins the “uncertainty principle of anthropology” (da Col 2013: xiii). If, as Jane Guyer argues, anthropology shares a disciplinary sensitivity with the ataraxia of the Skeptics—i.e., a state of inner peace and tranquility derived from the suspension of judgment and the acceptance of doubt—then the MPS was definitely not a place where the “epistemology of surprise” could be cultivated (Guyer 2013). Decisions as to who could comment on what during seminars and workshops followed a strictly hierarchical model, eliminating any possibility to dialogically discover coincidences and analogies, or to experience the “quickening of the unknown” (Guyer 2013).

By contrast, monotony, predictability, and confinement (the main ingredients of boredom) marked the everyday of MPS researchers (Toohey 2011). Discouraged to interact with researchers from other departments, forced to sit in seminars whose content had been designed without their inputs, deprived of space to engage in genuine exchanges, the everyday of researchers was punctuated by “low density events,” to borrow Edwin Ardener’s metaphor (2012). This intellectual suffocation led to researcher’s gradual disengagement. In a sense, where one would consider events or “quasi-events” (cf. da Col and Humphrey 2012) as the inaugural motor of the serendipitous and the subjunctive, fostering discovery and innovation, the temporal horizon of the Institute was not “framed” by the metacommunicative subjunctive signal “this is play”—as Gregory Bateson (1972–2006) would put it—but irremediably foreclosed by “this is the everyday,” a commitment to a sincere world of the “as is” instead than the multiple worlds of the “as if” we encounter in ritual, play, and any “agonistic” or aleatory activities.² Some established colleagues and readers might dismiss mine as a naive and utopian vision. I should then call for a pause and reflection on the role of the “subjunctive” and the creative and agonistic element of academic gatherings. Alfred Gell’s (1999) memorable praise of the British anthropology’s seminar culture as well as Michel de Certeau’s (1978) definition of the seminar as a “chatterscape” (Fr. *caquetoir*), where personal ideas are articulated through vigorous intellectual frictions with the collective, must be taken seriously: academic cultures where debates and seminars participation is restricted or severely limited are likely to foster little innovation. I do not argue this lightly.

During my time at the MPS, I often wondered how such a regime had managed to maintain itself almost untouched since its creation. As Peacock rightly argues, the reforms that followed May 1968 remained cosmetic and left the hegemony of the directors largely unchallenged. The audits conducted by the *Fachbeirat* were a

2. I am using here the crucial discussion of the work of the subjunctive and its relation to the attitude of “sincerity” by Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, Michael Puett, and Bennett Simon (2008).

formal exercise with limited consequences for the director. Researchers within my department never participated in any meeting organized by the *Betriebsrat*, sharing the view that voicing one's dissatisfaction in such a forum was both useless and potentially harmful to his or her career. Accountability measures put in place to ensure "good governance" had the paradoxical effect of silencing those who were supposed to benefit from them. In a more pernicious way still, repeated assessments tended to create consensus on what counted and what did not count as "valid scientific knowledge" (Strathern 2000). Like in the monitoring mechanism, I (together with Jane Cowan) observed at the UN Human Rights Council these bureaucratic rituals that forced researchers to make an account of themselves according to a pre-determined format had a capacity to reveal at least equivalent to their concealing power (Cowan and Billaud 2015).

A few years ago, when I, together with a small group of freshly recruited post-PhD researchers, sat in a meeting room of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, none of us knew what hierarchy at the MPS meant in practice. With its finely decorated wooden ceiling, its solid parquet floor, and its view on a modern glass building attached to another nineteenth-century villa, the architecture of the place, together with its location in the former German East, seemed to embody a scientific ethos to which we all could potentially relate: deeply anchored in a classic tradition with its clock set on the contemporary moment. The aim of the meeting was to get to know the members of a team who had been selected by a newly appointed director with the objective of contributing to current scholarly debates in the small subdiscipline of legal anthropology. To start the conversation, the director had offered each of us the possibility to present his/her vision for the future of the department. One researcher, a woman in her late thirties—who had moved her entire family to this small German town to follow "her passion for anthropology"—took the floor and explained with great excitement how she envisioned her new work environment as a "laboratory." As a place of experimentation, the department could be, in her view, a place to test some of the ideas she had derived from her long-term engagement with the anthropology of international law. She thought she had found the ideal setting to finally engage in vigorous theoretical debates about the nature of "the international," its values, and the kind of subjectivities and work ethos it produced. She found herself overjoyed at the possibility of experimenting with various working methods with her colleagues, by visiting each other's field sites, and developing collective publications. In that moment, the discussion turned into a lively exchange among inspired creative spirits. We all schemed for workshops, unknown horizons, and collaborations. It felt like we were on to something genuinely new, that we collectively had the potential to launch the new generation of scholars in the field of legal anthropology.

Seemingly annoyed by this overt expression of enthusiasm, a senior researcher—a man in his fifties who had spent most of his career at the Institute and whom we later understood had become increasingly cynical about the system—suddenly stopped the collective brainstorming. "Obviously, you do not know where you are," he said with a touch of impatience. "At the Max Planck, hierarchy is like this!" He illustrated his words with his two hands reproducing the shape of a pyramid. "The director decides everything!" he concluded. In visually replicating the pyramid, the senior scholar ended up reifying the director's position as "Director-King." The



director present in the room did not object, but slightly embarrassed by this overt exposure of her supremacy, quickly moved on to another topic.

Distraught by this unexpected intervention at a moment supposed to be used for bonding, we left the room at the end of the meeting wondering what awaited us in the months to come. At the beginning, we enjoyed the luxurious library of the institute as well as the general ease of our elite scholarly existence. Bedazzled by the fantastic opportunities for fieldwork thanks to the Institute's generous budget, for a moment we were thrilled by the prospects of our new positions. But slowly, we also started to understand our older colleague's early intervention. At first, directorial authority manifested itself in seemingly mundane bureaucratic details: the fieldwork budget, the conference attendance request. Soon, however, we started to learn how this authority translated into substantive control over the content of our research—how a panel proposal would be questioned on the basis of the theoretical approach adopted, or how the content of a conference paper would be scrutinized so as to conform with the director's vision.

One could see in the MPS director-led model a strange version of the ultimate, "effective" university of the future where procedures and templates dictate the content of knowledge. By turning intellectuals into a class of self-reporting bureaucrats governed by the tyranny of bibliometrics and competition for research grants, universities are gradually losing sight of their original purpose. The emptiness of this new structure of governance means that boredom at university is constantly looming. This is the reason why paying close attention to the MPS model and its derivatives is so important: for our capacity to resist and find alternatives will be enhanced by the insights we gain on the inner workings of the system.

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