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Pluralising Practices in a Neoliberal Knowledge Economy¹

My contribution to the debate discusses implications of pluralising practices in a neoliberal context. In doing so, I would like to caution against an uncritical celebration of pluralising practices without taking into consideration its neoliberal conditions. I will focus my discussion on three aspects: (1) commercial incentives; (2) bureaucratisation of 'impact'; (3) precarity of employment for cultural workers. All these discussions will be based on my observations of these practices in the UK, and primarily at British universities, but there are interesting parallels to practices of knowledge production in other parts of the world, as neoliberalism has become a transnational ideology and practice.

I use the term 'neoliberal knowledge economy' loosely to encompass knowledge production and dissemination in increasingly privatised schools, colleges and universities, as well as other cultural institutions including museums, art galleries and community centres. All these institutions have in common a responsibility to produce knowledge and to engage with the public. In the past, these institutions have provided the public with lectures, exhibitions, concerts etc. in a supposedly 'one-way transmission' model: the cultural instructors pass on knowledge or information to their target audience, and the latter 'receive' them. In recent years, practices of knowledge production and public engagement have increasingly diversified, with multiple and flexible formats, and on interactive and convergent media platforms. For example, a university lecturer may organise an art exhibition or a film screening to discuss the topic of their research with an audience. Many of these activities are interactive: as the research informs the audience, the audience also participates in the research process and shapes the research outcome. The pluralisation of knowledge production and dissemination has encouraged more creativity and stronger social ties between different communities. However, when all these take place in an increasingly commercialised context with the aim to generate more profit or produce more

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quantifiable 'impact', I have ample reasons to be concerned about the negative aspects of pluralising practices.

Commercialising Cultural Practices

The seed for 'pluralising practices' was planted in the UK in the 1980s, when higher education and other public sectors started to undergo the process of privatisation, and when 'culture' started to become the 'cultural industries', or 'creative industries' (Hesmondaigh 2013). Universities have become increasingly privatised since then. University tuition keeps soaring (at the moment an average of 9,000 pounds for UK/EU students and an average of 13,000 pounds for international students per year). To justify the value of a university degree, universities often promise to offer students (increasingly addressed as 'customers') not only knowledge in a specific academic field but also the skills needed for future employment. Under these circumstances, knowledge has to be taught in a customer-friendly way; at the same time, students should be exposed to the industry, or the 'real world', as early as possible. Given the new challenges, it is not enough for lecturers simply to 'improve' their ways of teaching by introducing multiple methods and approaches; they also have to understand how the industry works and, better still, be active participants in the relevant sectors. For cultural studies, this means, among many other things, connecting with cultural institutions such as film studios, museums, art galleries, city councils, festival organisers etc. Ideally, lecturers should be able to help students find internship opportunities or possibly jobs in these fields through their industry links. These connections to the industry bring universities better reputation, more profits and an increasing number of students. Consequently, there is a strong commercial incentive to pursue such collaborations.

Bureaucratisation of 'Impact'

Research conducted at UK universities has increasingly been driven to 'pluralise practices' by the 'impact' agenda. Research in the UK was guided by the RAE (Research Assessment Exercises) from 1986 onwards, later revamped into the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in 2014. The results of the nationwide research assessment not only determine the distribution of public funding and other academic resources, they also guide the directions and methodology of research. One outcome of the RAE/REF was the closure of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 2012 because it received a 3A mark, considered a

poor performance in the RAE. The 2014 REF lists 'impact' as one of the key indexes for assessing research excellence: it defines 'impact' as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (HEFCE 2016). 'Impact' has to demonstrate changes or benefits 'beyond academia' and, under the current conditions, should be measurable. This suggests that the old idea of 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge' is no longer sufficient. Knowledge should be able to produce quantifiable effects on the society. This idea may not be at odds with the Marxist belief in *praxis* and the role of philosophers in changing the world. It is the 'bureaucratisation' of societal impact that should alarm us: before conducting research, one has to consider how a research project can create 'impact' and how to measure this. For someone studying film, this might entail organising film screenings or discussion events to engage both with the film industry and the audience; an art historian can set up art exhibitions, workshops and public talks. More importantly, researchers often have to collect quotes and statistics during these events (sometimes the sole purpose of holding these events is to collect evidence of 'impact'): this usually involves handing out questionnaires or conducting interviews in order to find out whether the event has indeed changed people's way of thinking about certain issues. 'Change', in this context, is not understood in the Deleuzian sense as being ubiquitous and inevitable. In the empirical, scientific paradigm in question, change only occurs as the result of exerting pressure from the outside, as significant outcome in numerical figures or behavioural patterns, which potentially have economic or policy implications. The obsession with 'impact' goes hand in hand with pluralising practices: academics now realise that writing articles for a small scholarly community is not sufficient; one must constantly engage with the industry and the public in the hope of creating 'change'. When Meaghan Morris and Mette Hot celebrate "creativity, collective invention and imaginative academic activism" (2012: 1) for "instituting" cultural studies as a new disciplinary practice, they also remind cultural studies scholars of distinguishing between "bureaucratic (repetitive, meaningless, futile, dead) time" and "kairotic (socially significant, creative) time" (22). How to make one's time more creative and socially significant without being trapped in bureaucratic time is something we need to be wary of in pluralising the practices we engage in.

Precarity of Employment for Cultural Workers

I use the term 'cultural workers' to refer to people who work in education and creative industries. Some features of 'cultural work' include (1) its being temporary and contingent; (2) its being

project-based; (3) the “feminisation” of cultural labour, i.e. women making up the majority of the work force (McRobbie 2016). More and more university graduates and young artists have taken up ‘cultural labour’ by undertaking ‘projects’ for universities, art galleries, museums and other cultural institutions. These sectors have created numerous job opportunities, but it is important to note that many of these jobs are temporary, short-term, project based and low-paid. In the words of Isabell Lorey (2015), ‘precarity’, or instability, characterises many of these jobs. These ‘cultural workers’ usually have to spend long working hours, often unpaid or poorly paid, and experience considerable stress in order to meet a project deadline. When a project is completed, they are already on the way to find the next task to make a living. The rhetoric of being creative and flexible often conceals the fact that fewer long-term, stable and well-paid jobs are offered by employers; and many employers can get their work done without having to offer job security and work-related welfare. UK universities increasingly make permanent staff redundant by creating ‘projects’ for fixed-term or part-time staff. ‘Projects’, often taking the form of creative industry engagement, seem an ideal form for continuing to employ and exploit cultural workers, many of whom are young and single women who give up their personal life to pursue a career in the education sector or creative industries (McRobbie 2016). As Angela McRobbie (2016) warns, disguised by the excitement of ‘being creative’, new forms of exploitation and social hierarchies have been created.

To be clear, I am not advocating a conservative agenda that justifies the continuing existence of an old-fashioned way of lecturing and conducting research oblivious to contemporary society. An ardent adherence to the ‘old’ and an uncritical celebration of the ‘new’ can be equally problematic. Admittedly, both cultural workers and the general public have benefitted greatly from a multiplicity of knowledge practices; the engagement with each other makes it a rewarding experience. Yet, I am cautioning against an uncritical celebration of pluralising practices without taking into consideration its neoliberal conditions. As cultural workers ourselves, we need to find a balance between, if not a way out of, the neoliberal call to pluralise practices and the need to create new forms of knowledge practices and communities.

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