



‘People look at you like you’re mad if you say good things about academia’: Collective Negativity, Anti-neoliberalism, and Hostility to Institutions in UK Higher Education – The Dark Side of Solidarity?

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Abstract: Contemporary UK academia is riven with discontent: academics perform dissatisfaction on picket lines and social media, critiquing the so-called “neoliberal” university. This article draws on interviews with academic staff across England to consider the implications of this turn to complaint, arguing that belief in the toxicity of neoliberal academia and a corresponding romanticised investment in a “golden age” of HE has become required thinking. Focusing on the perception that university management, as a metonym for the institution, are suspect, I conclude that the prevalence of this belief, and its normative status, may promote solidarity between academics, but at a cost. If there is space for solidarity, the common ground upon which it is built appears to be dissatisfaction, negativity, and vocal disavowal of contemporary trends. However, every collective act also contains tensions, contradictions, and exclusions, which may go unexamined, especially if the prevailing ideology is believed to be progressive.

Keywords: neoliberalism; academia; inequalities; ideals; work; cultures

Introduction

Contemporary UK academia is riven with discontent: academics perform dissatisfaction on picket lines¹ and social media, and higher education (HE) researchers internationally critique the so-called “neoliberal” university in which staff are over-worked, under-paid, over-managed, and under-valued.^{2, 3, 4, 5} Record numbers report a desire to leave the sector,^{6, 7} and, curiously for a profession often characterised by ideals of independence and freedom,^{8, 9} academics position themselves as disempowered, ‘besieged’,¹⁰ and ‘under attack’.¹¹

While critics of modern academia point to a ‘competition fetish’¹² instilled by recent developments in HE policy and argue that compared to a collegiate past the present climate of universities is one of ruthless individualism, this perception of atomisation sits uncomfortably alongside the *collective* eschewal of neoliberal and managerialist ideologies. If there is space for solidarity in

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- ¹ M. Bergfeld, “‘Do You Believe in Life after Work?’ The University and College Union Strike in Britain,” *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 24, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258918772692>.
 - ² S. J. Ball, “Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neoliberal University,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60 (2012).
 - ³ E. Foster, “Academic Labor in the Age of Anxiety: Autoethnography Matters,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 4 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708617706124>.
 - ⁴ H. Radice, “How We Got Here: UK Higher Education under Neoliberalism,” *Acme* 12, no. 3 (2013).
 - ⁵ M. Tight, “The Golden Age of Academe: Myth or Memory?” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 58, no. 1 (2010).
 - ⁶ V. Gewin, “Has the ‘Great Resignation’ Hit Academia?” *Nature* 606 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-01512-6>.
 - ⁷ L. McKenzie, “Unequal Expressions: Emotions and Narratives of Leaving and Remaining in Precarious Academia,” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13011>.
 - ⁸ S. Harris, “Rethinking Academic Identities in Neo-liberal Times,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 10, no. 4 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510500238986>
 - ⁹ K. Hoskins, “The Price of Success? The Experiences of Three Senior Working Class Female Academics in the UK,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33 (2010).
 - ¹⁰ A. Piepmeier, “Besiegement,” in: *Rethinking Women’s and Gender Studies*, eds. C. M. Orr and A. Braithwaite (Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203134719>.
 - ¹¹ V. Loveday, “‘Under Attack’: Responsibility, Crisis and Survival Anxiety amongst Manager-Academics in UK Universities,” *The Sociological Review* 69, no. 5 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026121999209>.
 - ¹² R. Naidoo, “The Competition Fetish in Higher Education: Shamans, Mind Snares and Consequences,” *European Educational Research Journal* 17, no. 5 (2018).

academia, its common ground appears to be dissatisfaction, negativity, and vocal disavowal of contemporary trends.

This article considers the implications of such complaint, arguing that belief in the toxicity of neoliberal academia and a corresponding romanticised investment in a ‘golden age’¹³ of HE have become required thinking for those wishing to be ‘part of the club’ (Participant 18).¹⁴ Drawing on interviews with academic staff in English higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2018 I demonstrate the ubiquity of a particular version of “critical thinking” as an idealised academic trait and suggest that, regardless of the legitimacy of the criticism, the need to visibly communicate disavowal of “the neoliberal academy”, particularly through hostility towards institutions and those who play managerial roles within them, risks perpetuating a joyless and exclusionary environment.¹⁵ While I do not wish to deny or defend many aspects of contemporary academia, I do seek to complexify the conventional groupthink around this topic and suggest that the logical extension of certain arguments against supposedly “neoliberal” moves take us not towards a utopian future but a regressive past.

I begin with a brief description of the underpinning research before moving to consider neoliberalism as a concept, evaluating its meaning and utility as context for my argument that academics’ anti-neoliberal critiques of HE may not be as productive as intended. I then briefly summarise what is meant by “the neoliberal university” in order to clarify the types of policies, processes, and practices deemed problematic. Finally, I suggest that valorisation of critical thinking results in a collective thought pattern around contemporary UK HE – namely that university management, as a metonym for the institution (and the wider construct of “the neoliberal university”), are suspect. I conclude that the prevalence of this belief and its normative status, especially when epitomised through group action such as union strikes, may promote solidarity between (some) academics, but at a cost. Every collective act also contains tensions, contradictions, and exclusions, which may go

¹³ Tight, “Golden Age.”

¹⁴ Hereafter quotations attributed to research participants will appear in-text, shortened to Px.

¹⁵ I acknowledge – but, so as not to over reach, side-step – the fact that this atmosphere may be inflected differently now than when data was generated in 2018, following national and global developments (e.g. Brexit, Covid-19, wars on Ukraine and Palestine, the former President of the United States inciting an insurrection, etc.). Such are the “limitations” of qualitative research, inevitably looking backwards through data that is a product of its time; however, the past can nonetheless illuminate the present and future, showing what changes – and what remains stubbornly the same.

unexamined when the prevailing ideology is believed to be underpinned by the progressive and socially liberal ideals many participants saw as emblematic of academics' politics.

Project and Methods

Data was generated during an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project¹⁶ based at Lancaster University and designed to investigate top-level norms of academic culture in England, considering the implications for equality, diversity, and inclusion. Semi-structured interviews of 60–200 minutes were conducted with 29 academic staff¹⁷ (one per participant) in 2018 – a period characterised by widespread breakdowns in industrial relations between HE staff and institutional management that remain unresolved. While I did not aim to investigate academic solidarities, the industrial action taking place at many universities during fieldwork brought this into the data as it was both a live subject for many participants and a logistical consideration when planning the interviews.

Participant recruitment combined social media advertisements and snowballing; from the initial pool of 105 volunteers I purposively sampled interviewees representing a diversity of genders, ethnicities, career stages, disciplinary alignments, institution types, job roles, geographic locations, sexual orientations, family situations, and socioeconomic and national backgrounds. Direct quotes from interviews are attributed to a participant number to avoid the associations pseudonyms can carry; no biographical details are provided about individual interviewees unless present within their testimony, primarily to preserve anonymity.

As a researcher, I operate from an “insider”, feminist-constructivist cultural sociology perspective and my focus tends to fall on considerations of power, inequalities, and group cultures.¹⁸ While this standpoint inevitably shapes the data analysis process, neither the analysis nor the discussion here are executed within a particular theoretical paradigm or standardised analytical approach. Data analysis began pragmatically, tagging excerpts for

¹⁶ Award number 1784189.

¹⁷ Including teaching-and-research and teaching- and research-only roles.

¹⁸ For more detail about how reflexivity, bias, and ethics were approached in this project see J. Wren Butler, “‘These little things blossom and then they die because they don’t fit the world’: Inequalities, the subtle cruelties of unbelonging, and the “true academic” in “neoliberal” English academia” (PhD diss., Lancaster University, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/thesis/1881>.

subject matter or theme where the content inspired curiosity or was especially relevant to the overarching research questions guiding the project. From here, the concept of ‘unbelonging’ was originated,¹⁹ and through this lens I re-analysed the data to produce a taxonomy of the situations, events, incidents, processes, or practices that participants experienced as engendering feelings of failure, inadequacy, impostorism, or out-of-placeness in the academic environment or their academic identity (‘sites of unbelonging’). These sites of unbelonging were allocated into three broad areas (‘legibility zones’) – the institutional, the ideological, and the individual – which provided a framework for thinking about how exclusion operates within, across, and between the levels of bureaucracy, belief, and identity.²⁰ This article concentrates on one strand of belief that arose in the ideological zone: hostility to neoliberalism as communicated through suspicion of the university as an institution, resulting in an oppositional, adversarial relationship between those with management responsibilities and ‘the troops’ (P12). In the politically-charged context of industrial action under which the research was conducted, and given the left-wing associations of trade unions, taking a stand against “the neoliberal university”, as represented by managers, was – and in my “anecdotal”, quasi-ethnographic experience still is – framed by a vocal majority of UK academics (as reflected in participants’ testimony) as a stance that is both progressive and “correct”. However, when the nuances of this groupthink are unpacked its fundamental premises are shown to contain contradictions, tensions, and logical conclusions that belie this liberalism.

Neoliberalism

“Neoliberalism” and its shortcomings

The term “neoliberalism” is ubiquitous in contemporary cultural-political-economic critiques by the political left,²¹ particularly as related to HE.²²

¹⁹ For more about unbelonging and the theoretical architecture of the project as a whole, see J. Wren Butler, “Legibility zones: An empirically-informed framework for considering unbelonging and exclusion in contemporary English academia,” *Social Inclusion* 9, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i3.4074>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ B. Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism as a Concept,” *Capital & Class* 41, no. 3 (2017).

²² M. Tight, “The Neoliberal Turn in Higher Education,” *Higher Education Quarterly* 73 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12197>.

Problematically, though, neoliberalism is an imprecise concept^{23, 24} frequently used in an undefined manner²⁵ that suggests it is understood as having a universally stable meaning.²⁶ In actuality it often operates as an empty signifier leaving the reader to arrive at their own interpretation. I do not wish to replicate this problem, but neither can I provide a single definition; my engagement with the concept here is primarily through its uses by others who do not have a shared understanding themselves. To give a flavour, however:

It seems generally to be agreed that [neoliberalism] refers to the liberalizing of global markets associated with the reduction of state power: state interventions in the economy are minimized; privatization, finance, and market processes are emphasized; capital controls and trade restrictions are eased; free markets, free trade, and free enterprise are the buzzwords. Beyond that, definitions become more partial.²⁷

One challenge in pinning down neoliberalism is that it does not “exist” – there is no clear progenitor of it as a “movement” and those who are seen to ascribe to and perpetuate the “neoliberal agenda” do not use the term themselves.^{28, 29, 30, 31} As none will lay claim to being neoliberals, then, it is a descriptor applied only to (right-wing) others by their (left-wing) critics,^{32, 33, 34, 35} suggesting that the very people who enact neoliberalism do not agree that it is “a thing”. This is further complicated by the fact neoliberalism can be used to reference multiple spheres and ‘has been understood in diverse ways to characterise a huge range of social practices’.³⁶ Rodgers, for example, observes:

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ R. Venugopal, “Neoliberalism as Concept,” *Economy and Society* 44, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2015.1013356>.

²⁵ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism.”

²⁶ J. Rowlands and S. Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything: A Bourdieuan Analysis of Illusio in Educational Research,” *Critical Studies in Education* 54, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.830631>.

²⁷ “Neoliberalism,” Oxford Reference, accessed 8 September, 2022, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100228313>.

²⁸ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism.”

²⁹ D. Rodgers, “The Uses and Abuses of ‘Neoliberalism’,” *Dissent* 65, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2018.0010>.

³⁰ Rowlands and Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything.”

³¹ Venugopal, “Neoliberalism as Concept.”

³² Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism.”

³³ Rodgers, “Uses.”

³⁴ Rowlands and Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything.”

³⁵ Venugopal, “Neoliberalism as Concept.”

³⁶ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism,” 436.

the problem with neoliberalism is neither that it has no meaning nor that it has an infinite number of them. It is that the term has been applied to four distinctly different phenomena. ‘Neoliberalism’ stands, first, for the late capitalist economy of our times; second, for a strand of ideas; third, for a globally circulating bundle of policy measures; and fourth, for the hegemonic force of the culture that surrounds and entraps us.³⁷

The breadth and diffusion of how neoliberalism is conceived contributes to a convincing argument of its nature as ‘impossibly vague’:³⁸ a ‘conceptual trash-heap’³⁹ or ‘lucky-dip’⁴⁰ that ‘becomes an obstacle to critical social scientists’ efforts to identify the relations between different social practices and the main drivers of change’.⁴¹ Venugopal notes that ‘an extraordinary number of different and often contradictory phenomena have come to be identified as neoliberal’, thus if it ‘is indeed everywhere and in everything, then it can be productively deployed only as a contextual wallpaper, for example in reference to “the neoliberal age” or “paradigm”, rather than as an analytical work-horse’.⁴² Likewise, Rowlands and Rawolle assert that “neoliberalism” is used in academia to explain almost anything and everything’⁴³ and can be reduced to ‘everything I don’t like about the world’,⁴⁴ ‘a catch-all explanation for anything negative’⁴⁵ and ‘universal scapegoat’ meaning anything ‘out there, impacting on me, that I don’t really understand and don’t much like’.⁴⁶

As detractors of neoliberalism-as-a-concept are keen to point out, identifying its failures is not to deny or applaud the phenomena it may describe. Indeed, the problem is precisely that

by using ‘neoliberalism’ in a non-specific way (and by not challenging the myths associated with its use) we are at risk of perpetuating the dominant discourse of neoliberalism rather than disrupting or challenging it. Simply by giving space to that discourse in our work we demonstrate its value; it is only by critically examining that discourse and its impact (and by deconstructing it) that we have any hope of starting a revolution, let alone participating in one.⁴⁷

³⁷ Rodgers, “Uses,” 81.

³⁸ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism,” 441.

³⁹ Rodgers, “Uses,” 80.

⁴⁰ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism,” 451.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁴² Venugopal, “Neoliberalism as Concept,” 169.

⁴³ Rowlands and Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything,” 260.

⁴⁴ Laidlaw, 2015, quoted in Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism,” 442.

⁴⁵ Rowlands and Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything,” 261.

⁴⁶ Tight, “The Neoliberal Turn,” 279.

⁴⁷ Rowlands and Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything,” 269.

This article reflects my attempt to avoid simply ‘perpetuating the dominant discourse’; while I do not hope to start a revolution, it is my aim to ‘disrupt and challenge’. In that spirit, Rodgers asks a series of pertinent questions to hold in mind:

Is the overnight ubiquity of the term ‘neoliberalism’ the sign of a new acuteness about the way the world operates? Or is it a caution that a word, accelerating through too many meanings, employed in too many debates, gluing too many phenomena together, and cannibalizing too many other words around it, may make it harder to see both the forces at loose in our times and where viable resistance can be found?⁴⁸

The danger of this ‘single verbal omnibus’⁴⁹ is that it ‘provides little help identifying what exactly the user is against’, becoming a ‘blunt instrument’ that encourages ‘a backward-looking even nostalgic politics and one which can exaggerate the benign nature of state intervention’.⁵⁰ As Rowlands and Rawolle note, framing neoliberalism as ‘a unitary concept’⁵¹ means ‘it is very difficult to draw a distinction (or a clear dividing line) between those things that are attributable to neoliberalism and those that are not’.⁵² I therefore interpret the regular framing of academia as a newly neoliberal space less as a tool for ‘analysis and deliberation’ and more as a positioning device: ‘neoliberalism is defined, conceptualized and deployed exclusively by those who stand in evident opposition to it, such that the act of using the word has the twofold effect of identifying oneself as non-neoliberal, and of passing negative moral judgment over it’.⁵³

As I show later, opposing perceived neoliberalism appears to be constitutive of ideal academic identity and can fulfil Dunn’s warning that ‘[t]he haste to condemn contemporary capitalism can mean seeing the past in too favourable a light’.⁵⁴ But what exemplifies neoliberalism in the context of UK academia, and how do contemporary times compare to the past?

The changing landscape of UK HE and academic work

The academic position, the story goes, used to be noble, comfortable, and autonomous: a ‘gentlemanly’ way of life – until, in the UK at least, a ‘fall from

⁴⁸ Rodgers, “Uses,” 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁰ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism,” 451.

⁵¹ Rowlands and Rawolle, “Neoliberalism Is Not a Theory of Everything,” 261.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 264.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁴ Dunn, “Against Neoliberalism,” 448.

grace' beginning in the mid-1970s.⁵⁵ Since then, 'there is often a prevailing sense in academic discussions that things used to be a good deal better, and that they can only now get even worse'.⁵⁶ Tight refers to this rose-tinted past as the 'golden age myth', but quickly notes that its mythological status 'does not mean that it did not occur, nor, alternatively, that it has no elements of truth about it', seemingly agreeing that academics of yore 'enjoyed a relatively leisured and un-pressurised existence as a kind of elite priesthood'.⁵⁷ This contrasts with the contemporary perception of UK HE as 'locked into a competition fetish'⁵⁸ characterised by the 'corporatized university in which efficiency, productivity, and excellence are the guiding principles'.⁵⁹

However, while some may conceive of the so-called golden age – assuming, for a moment, an uncritical acceptance of its existence – as a utopia of times gone by, others, especially feminist researchers, are more sceptical. The 'elite priesthood' conception of the academy can be seen as an "ivory tower": a lofty milieu of white men of a certain class, distant from the "real world" and its pedestrian concerns⁶⁰ but just as invested in competitiveness, albeit venerated with an intellectual patina.⁶¹ As Ball observes, '[r]eflection is a dangerous thing; it is all too easy to slip from careful re-assessment and analysis into nostalgia and "golden ageism";⁶² we should be suspicious of any framing that overly romanticises a bygone moment lest we forget that social context may be absent from these fantasies. The golden age of academe did not bestow its glow upon all – indeed, the supposed 'leisured and un-pressurised existence' of this era perhaps relied upon the faculty population being relatively small and homogenous.

Despite such faulty remembering and wistful nostalgias,⁶³ the "new" HE is deemed injurious,⁶⁴ individualistic, marketised, and over-managed,

⁵⁵ Halsey et al., 1971, 169, quoted in Tight, "Golden Age," 107.

⁵⁶ Tight, "Golden Age," 106.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Naidoo, "Competition Fetish," 605.

⁵⁹ A. Mountz et al., "For Slow Scholarship : A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1241.

⁶⁰ B. Read, "Truth, Masculinity and the Anti-elitist Backlash against the University in the Age of Trump," *Teaching in Higher Education* 23, no. 5 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1457636>.

⁶¹ Naidoo, "Competition Fetish."

⁶² Ball, "Performativity," 17.

⁶³ C. Clarke and D. Knights, "Careering Through Academia: Securing Identities or Engaging Ethical Subjectivities," *human relations* 68, no. 12 (2015), 1874.

⁶⁴ R. Gill, "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University," in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, eds. R. Ryan-Flood and R. Gill (Routledge, 2009).

dominated by forces that must be resisted⁶⁵ and spawning ‘academic capitalists’.⁶⁶ However, this framing of “neoliberal academia” – as distinct from plain old academia – suggests it is set meaningfully apart from another (unmarked) version of HE. However, because there is no equivalent characterisation of what came prior to the neoliberal ‘turn’⁶⁷ it is unclear exactly how novel so-called neoliberal developments are. Similarly, to qualify academia *in particular* as neoliberal in this, the neoliberal ‘paradigm’, indicates a sense of exceptionalism; HE should be unaffected by the prevailing logics of its time.⁶⁸

In 2024 few institutions, public or private, are uncontaminated by policies that might be termed neoliberal.⁶⁹ Living in ‘the neoliberal age’ – whether or not we call it that – there cannot be any sector that is not operated according to these principles given that ‘neoliberalism remains the dominant political philosophy across the world’.⁷⁰ Yet we do not speak of the neoliberal hospital, broadcaster, or school, though these institutions have undergone many of the same transitions as HE, or at least transformations ushered in with the same spirit. What makes the neoliberal university so special that we cannot speak of the contemporary academy without stipulating its neoliberalness? If modern HE ‘bows’ to the forces of the market and ‘revenue-generating aims’,⁷¹ what forces was it subject to “before”, were they any better, and what should it bow to instead? Are the ills afflicting contemporary HE as neoliberal as they seem? As Harris points out, the image of the idealised ‘care-free’ scholar, regularly used as an example of contemporary pressures that make academia inhospitable to anyone with responsibilities beyond HE, actually dates back to Cartesian models of scholarship and rational/emotional binaries that far pre-date neoliberalism.⁷² Gill asserts that we must ‘reclaim Universities as spaces of openness, intellectual freedom and collegiality’⁷³ – but were they ever thus?

⁶⁵ V. Loveday, “Luck, Chance, and Happenstance? Perceptions of Success and Failure amongst Fixed-term Academic Staff in UK Higher Education,” *British Journal of Sociology* 69, no. 3 (2018).

⁶⁶ S. Slaughter and L. Leslie, “Expanding and Elaborating the Concept of Academic Capitalism,” *Organization* 8, no. 2 (2001).

⁶⁷ Tight, “The Neoliberal Turn.”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Radice, “How We Got Here.”

⁷¹ Naidoo, “Competition Fetish,” 607.

⁷² Harris, “Rethinking Academic Identities,” 5.

⁷³ R. Gill, “Academics, Cultural Workers and Critical Labour Studies,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 7, no. 1 (2014): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2013.861763>.

I am not unaware of the ‘injuries’⁷⁴ that can come as consequence of modern trends: both literature and project participants demonstrate that ‘academics are experiencing substantial stress, anxiety and pressure’.⁷⁵ Furthermore, I am a researcher myself and have worked extensively in HE in a variety of capacities; I am neither blind to nor unaffected by the contemporary condition of UK academia. However, the baby and the bathwater frequently seem to be cast aside together: not everything “neoliberal” is “bad”, and precisely whether, how, and why badness manifests should be considered not assumed. Without promoting a “race to the bottom” mindset it is worth at least questioning whether the perceived reduction in quality of academic life is partly due to redistribution – if we accept that the privileged must concede some of their advantage to enable its transfer to those with less, the sense that contemporary academia is no longer ‘gentlemanly’⁷⁶ could be seen as the price of widening access beyond literal gentlemen. Ball is being critical when they say ‘[m]y home in the ivory tower is being flattened by neo-liberal bulldozers’,⁷⁷ but the image of an exclusive hierarchy being ‘flattened’ is one many arguing for greater inclusion might champion. These are considerations to hold in mind; what beliefs get smuggled in with antipathy towards all things neoliberal?

The academic as “critical thinker”

Participants identified several traits as constitutive of the (ideal) academic mindset. Perhaps surprisingly, intelligence was rarely cited directly and instead assumed a necessary baseline, but it was emphasised that an academic is more than simply book-smart – they do not just receive transmitted knowledge, they are an intellectual who *thinks* about things. As P14 says:

[being an academic has] probably worked its way into my identity, because I do feel like I have the right to question things, which is what makes me difficult and independent, and I, I don’t want to turn that off. I don’t want to be like ‘oh I have no opinions at work about how things are run’.

⁷⁴ Gill, “Breaking the Silence.”

⁷⁵ V. Loveday, “The Neurotic Academic: Anxiety, Casualization, and Governance in the Neoliberalizing University,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 11, no. 2 (2018): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2018.1426032>.

⁷⁶ Tight, “Golden Age.”

⁷⁷ S. J. Ball, “Living the Neo-liberal University,” *European Journal of Education* 50, no. 3 (2015): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12132>.

‘The right to question things’, here, is linked to being ‘difficult and independent’ and demonstrating this by having ‘opinions at work about how things are run’. Indeed, Leary sees it as of ‘pivotal significance in the role and responsibility of being an academic’ to ‘critique the status quo’,⁷⁸ suggesting a ceaseless project of dismantling each new iteration of the ever-unsatisfactory norm.

Danvers asserts that critical thought is comprised of ‘a diverse set of knowledge practices involving in-depth questioning and academic debate that have come to represent the intellectual mission’.⁷⁹ Although participants could be pained when ‘academic debate’ centred around their own work, they acknowledged that finding weaknesses or problems in things is a key aspect of what academics do and a core part of how they think. P10 says, ‘I have no issue with people being critical because that’s the whole point of [...] academic culture is to critique’, while P9 agrees that ‘the job of us putting ourselves out there is to be attacked, in a nice way’ (ideally, anyway – many participants had experienced more vicious forms of critique). As P18 highlights, though, these tendencies, especially as applied to ‘how things are run’, can fall out of balance: ‘people look at you like you’re mad if you say, you know, good things about academia’. The ‘right to question’ can become a *requirement*; there is a perceived need to ‘moan a lot about academia’ to be ‘part of the club’ (P18).

This sense that the academic mindset is habitually and necessarily ‘critical’ in a manner prone to being ‘difficult’, ‘independent’, and ‘attacking’ contributes to a collective – yet recalcitrant – ideology of dissatisfaction and complaint: academics, says P22, are ‘negative people’. Although these are not the only (or best) hallmarks of critical thought, which can more generally be understood as the ability to form discerning judgements based on the open-minded analysis and interpretation of evidence, participants regularly linked critical thinking with the “occupational hazard” of – or, perhaps, occupational excuse for – becoming a ‘negative person’. However, this orientation towards the problematic can disguise the level of privilege and comfort academic workers enjoy by foregrounding hardship, particularly when comparisons are made between contemporary and historical HE rather than modern academia and other industries. Despite the frequent observation that academia is an individualistic and competitive environment, participants were largely in solidarity regarding the ills of neoliberalism and the challenges of

⁷⁸ Leary, “The Perfect Imposter Storm,” 518.

⁷⁹ E. Danvers, “Who Is the Critical Thinker in Higher Education? A Feminist Re-thinking,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 23, no. 5 (2018): 548, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1454419>.

being an academic (though it should be noted there was also a collective fantasy that academia is “all right for some”). This was evidenced most strongly in deep suspicion towards institutions and those perceived to hold institutional power – though, the fact many academics hold management roles that implicate them in this power means it is not always easy to draw a neat line between “us” and “them”. The most important point to note, however, is the prevalence of a divisive narrative that frames academics as ‘besieged’⁸⁰ and “the neoliberal university” as the besieger.

Hostility to Managers and Institutions

It was common for participants to see their employers as pursuant of a hostile agenda, framing academia as an environment riven with conflict, complaint, and enmity between perceived factions of staff interpreted to hold different priorities and interests.⁸¹ Relations between individual academics and managers therefore act as a proxy for the interaction between staff and their diffuse concept of “the institution”, representing a binary relationship between “collegiality” and “managerialism”.⁸² This suspicion clustered around three, related pillars of belief: the idea that very senior managers, even with academic roles or credentials, are ‘not an academic in any true sense’ (P27); the positioning of management as ‘the other side’ (P12); and the notion of institutions as meddling, interfering, and overbearing in their ‘micromanagement’ (P20) of academics.

Manager/academic identity conflict

Several participants acknowledged that occupying a management role was a difficult prospect with relative lack of power to effect meaningful change. However, those in such posts voiced frustration at the tendency of staff to complain without being willing to ‘stand to run’ themselves:

one thing I got really sick of early on, talking to fellow academics saying, ‘all the managers are shit, if I was running this department this is how I’d do it’. So I’d say, ‘well ok why don’t you stand to run this department?’ ‘Oh no I wouldn’t. Wouldn’t do that.’ And I kind of feel we get the management we deserve, so if nobody wants to step forward and do it, then it’s going to be shit (P8).

⁸⁰ Piepmeier, “Besiegement.”

⁸¹ M. Addison, *Social Games and Identity in the Higher Education Workplace* (Palgrave, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51803-3_2.

⁸² Loveday, “Under Attack.”

This reluctance may be related to a sense that academics who move into management are ‘looked down upon’⁸³ as no longer “really” academic: ‘some people would tell you I’m not an academic now anyway because I’ve taken a management role’ (P8).⁸⁴ Such a perception is shored up by participants’ understanding that transferring into management is something “failed” academics do to cover up the “death” of their research – not so much ‘stepping forward’ as taking a step down. For academics whose career is faltering, ‘selling out’⁸⁵ is an option:

sometimes they’ll end up being more of a sort of a managerial administrator type position I guess. Like a Pro-Vice-Chancellor something or other. Usually people try and disguise the fact that their research has died (P26).

This perpetuates a belief that manager-academics lack the drive, mettle, or brilliance to stick a research career, although arguably this is considered a lesser crime than coming into such a role from outside academia.

Critiques of neoliberal academia point to “managerialism” as a key harbinger of decline because those in charge of HEIs frequently no longer hold academic credentials.⁸⁶ That universities are ‘increasingly managed by professionals treating the institutions as businesses’⁸⁷ – in contrast to the “golden age” when it is suggested ‘most universities were primarily bottom-up organizations driven by intellectual agendas’⁸⁸ – is perhaps part of the scepticism towards manager-academics, who become tainted by association (though I might question whose ‘agendas’ these were and how or for whom they were better⁸⁹). While managers are frequently cast as the driving force behind marketisation,⁹⁰ the installation of “corporate” professionals is likely a response to wider policy changes that encourage universities to align with business principles. This being the case, even if we disagree with those principles, it is not automatically “bad” that people who know how to run organisations in this way are drafted in (whether they are individually good at this or not is a

⁸³ McKenzie, “Unequal Expressions,” 535.

⁸⁴ Incidentally, this participant was also asked by their trade union to step down from their role as representative when they became Head of Department.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ E.g. D. Fasenfest, “Reflections on the Decline of Academia: Large Problems and Small Minds,” *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 7–8 (2021).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1057.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1058.

⁸⁹ Loveday, “Under Attack.”

⁹⁰ E.g. Fasenfest, “Reflections.”

separate point), especially if academic staff cannot countenance dirtying their hands with this type of work.

Although there is an idea that ‘there has been a shift in the core values and purpose of HE in light of neoliberalism, where profits, student numbers, and a competitive advantage replace a sense of collegiality and moral responsibility’,⁹¹ I would suggest that these are not necessarily competing or mutually exclusive aims. Nonetheless, there remains a view that managers are aligned with institutional values of ‘profit’ and ‘competitive advantage’ while academics cling to ‘collegiality and moral responsibility’, feeding an “us and them” discourse.

Management are ‘the other side’?

Most participants held negative opinions of management as a concept and believed – not inaccurately – that acquiring managerial responsibilities themselves would decrease time available for more straightforwardly academic work. There was also an idea that taking on these positions would mean ‘going to the other side’ (P12). For P12 in particular, the division between ‘the troops’ and the ‘bosses’ was stark, and, as evidenced by the use of war imagery, combative: ‘one of the reasons I ran into trouble with bosses at [my former institution] was because I wouldn’t go over to their side because I [...] wanted to be with the troops’. Later they were offered the opportunity to become an integral part of ‘their side’ at another institution, but declined:

I thought, ‘actually do I really want to be going to the other side and making people do stuff that they don’t wanna do and just enforcing this kind of metric pressure and the sorts of bollocks that make it all so shit?’

This paints a bleak picture of how management is perceived, and the problem, as P8 points out, is that *someone* has to be in the role of ‘making’ at least *some* ‘people do stuff they don’t wanna do’. If those who are critical of the ‘bollocks that make it all so shit’ decline to take up an “enemy” position they lose the potential to implement the bollocks in a better way, or to interrogate the internal ‘tension and ambiguities’ such positions raise, preferring instead to ‘manage them simply through cynicism’ and critique.⁹² The sense of management as ‘the other side’ instead of, perhaps, a different role in a team, while understandable given conditions in contemporary HE, nonetheless increases division. Those keeping their academic identity pure by distancing

⁹¹ Addison, “Social Games,” 79.

⁹² Clarke and Knights, “Careering,” 1866.

themselves from the ambivalences of power retain a moral high ground from which to critique it; however, if no-one for whom these posts represent an ethical conflict inhabits them, the momentum and direction will continue to be determined by those for whom there is no such quandary. Management will remain ‘the grubby end of academia’, as P28, who after a stint in senior management stepped back down into a lower-level managerial academic role, characterised it.

P28’s experience of senior management confirmed that ‘these were not my people’, exemplifying the idea that managers are somehow “different”. This perception reinforces separations between academics and managers, adding to the belief that managerial identity usurps academic identity – the two are mutually exclusive. But are they? While I can empathise with discomfort about becoming complicit in practices that present a moral dilemma, the myth that it is only managers who circulate neoliberalism in academia overlooks the complicity everyone in HE has by virtue of being associated with an institution (and, in a way, by refusing to take responsibility for running it). Although Loveday claims that ‘those who find themselves in structurally advantageous positions may have not only failed to challenge the neoliberalisation of the sector, but may have aided and abetted these modes of governance’,⁹³ I suggest that we cannot help but ‘aid and abet’ – and benefit from in certain ways – these modes simply by participating in institutional dynamics. We may have plausible deniability staying at the “clean end”, but it might not leave us as unsullied as we imagine.

If institutional power becomes synonymous with ‘grubbiness’, attempts to remain “clean” inevitably involve a degree of self-marginalisation. This may reinforce an outsider identity as more ‘authentic’;⁹⁴ Raghavan and Hurley observe that ‘the academy’s constitutive dynamics of othering’ lead to a ‘relentless commodification and fetishization of otherness’ that can result in ‘a certain kind of affective investment in injury, besiegement, and defensiveness’.^{95, 96} Besiegement mentality can lead academics to ‘see themselves as embodying a righteousness, even a political purity, which the rest of the academy’ – in this case, management – ‘threatens’.⁹⁷ This claim of attack can also function as a shield with which people ‘absolve themselves of negative

⁹³ Loveday, “Luck,” 163.

⁹⁴ A. Raghavan and M. Hurley, “Haunting Imposterism,” in: *The Palgrave Handbook of Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education*, eds. M. Addison, M. Breeze, and Y. Taylor (Palgrave, 2022), 596, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86570-2_36.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See also Clarke and Knights, “Careering.”

⁹⁷ Piepmeier, “Besiegement,” 125.

behaviours and ideologies without actually addressing or changing' them⁹⁸ – in other words, positions of besiegement can be used to elide responsibility for both complicity and active hostility, which become recast as a reasonable “defence” against a perceived “attack”. This can be especially problematic when the need to demonstrate which ‘side’ one is on becomes a public matter, such as during periods of industrial action where the besiegement narrative is strongly invoked and tensions run high, entrenching divisions between ‘righteousness’ and ‘political purity’ on the one hand and ‘threat’ on the other. For those who cannot afford the luxury of purity, being branded as the ‘other side’ can produce profound distress.

Strike and strife

For manager participants straddling worlds could prove difficult to negotiate, particularly when conflicts erupt across the sector such as industrial action by the University and College Union (UCU), beginning in 2018.⁹⁹ While for some the strikes were a unifying act of solidarity, for others they were divisive and isolating; P5, for example, felt deeply conflicted about which side of the picket line to ally with:

I haven't been striking. Well no I did, I did one day as a marker in the sand. But I don't know what would happen if I didn't pick up all the bits. I'm really worried and I'm kind of gutted. [...] It makes me feel terrible to not be with my colleagues but at the same time if I did [strike], the state of the mess is bad.

One problem with labour withdrawal in HE, as P5 illustrates, is that although the function of industrial action is to be disruptive, allowing things to fall apart without ‘picking up all the bits’ has little impact beyond producing ‘mess’ for those closest to it. Given the intertwined interests of academics and their institutions it is unclear that striking is effective in the HE sector, especially as thus far this action has been non-continuous. This approach does not materially hobble institutions; disruption primarily affects students and those who do not, or cannot, strike – particularly professional services staff, whose interests are not necessarily represented by UCU or its strike demands, and whose labour keeps core services running in the absence of academics. The target of the action is not easily identified and therefore neither is its impact, perhaps suggesting academia is less “marketised” than claimed given there is no obvious profiteer and no clear route to putting the damage on their purse.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁹⁹ See Bergfeld, “Do You Believe.”

In HE the immediate fallout barely touches leadership – constituent parts of the institution are liable to go up in flames long before Vice-Chancellors so much as take off their jacket. Hence P5’s ambivalence:

I think it’s affecting me quite badly actually because I can’t settle on a position that makes sense to me. [...] [T]here’s a part of me that cannot let various sort of financial catastrophes happen. Maybe I should, maybe I should say no. But I just feel like long term down the line that has human consequences too and I don’t think I can live with them and yet at the same time then I am not there with my colleagues and some of them are not happy about that [...]. So it’s partly I’ve internalised the conflict myself whereas [...] quite a number of them are probably quite happy that I’ve not let everything go belly-up (P5).

It could be argued that managers have an increased imperative to strike as the impact will be bigger, but, as P5 says, ‘down the line that has human consequences too’. Part of the managerial responsibility is using the knowledge the position affords to try and make the best long-term strategic choice for the most people.¹⁰⁰ As some will disagree and others may lack the information necessary to understand these decisions, the chances of being stuck in the middle are high – represented here by the tension between the colleagues who are ‘not happy’ that P5 is ‘not there’ and those who are ‘probably quite happy that I’ve not let everything go belly-up’, free to live out their principles while someone else confronts the ‘tensions and ambiguities’ of keeping the engine running. P5 acknowledges that their response is in part personal to them, but nonetheless articulates a conflict that clearly exists regardless of whether individuals ‘internalise’ it.

Institutional interference

Viewing HEIs with suspicion meant some participants had difficulty understanding themselves as a constituent part of their university. For P28 the trouble ‘clipping together’ academic and institutional identity was related to location – an academic who ‘sits at home in his study writing’ and an institutional representative who ‘comes in and moves things around spreadsheets’. That the institution underwrites the “proper” academic activity conducted off-premises is obscured by the very fact of its untethering from a work environment, leading to a split identity – one academic, one institutional. Given that many academics are able to work (partly) remotely, especially post-Covid, the sense that this off-site labour is being “stolen” by the institution may be increased. Reluctance to become entwined in institutional machinery therefore could be

¹⁰⁰ Loveday, “Under Attack.”

seen as a way to avoid acknowledging the level of interdependence between academics and HEIs and remain in a position where ‘I still haven’t squared that away, that as an academic you’re linked to an institution’ (P28).

Participants displayed considerable resentment towards their institutions, which were largely interpreted as perpetrators, not fellow victims, of neoliberal agendas – interfering and overbearing where instead they should ‘create a good environment for people where they can do well, but leave them alone. I mean just get good people and let them do their thing’ (P20). Central issues here are the fact directives come ‘from the top down’ (P20) and the feeling that the institution has no trust in its people, thus ‘micromanages’ (P20) them through technology and paperwork. However, there is a balance to be struck, for academic jobs still allow for greater autonomy than most professions, and it could be argued that P20’s preferred management approach of ‘leave them alone’ is the unsupported situation P29 reported finding themselves in as a new staff member. For those who feel confident and comfortable being ‘left alone’ may be the ideal situation, where for others it might be experienced as being abandoned to ‘sink or swim’ (P29).¹⁰¹ It is also worth noting the sense that academics should be entitled to ‘do their thing’: is this a reasonable expectation? Should we be granted unfettered freedom to do as we please – and if so, who is the arbiter of ‘good people’? Is some form of oversight and accountability appropriate given that most academic salaries and research are funded from public money? Should someone other than the individual academic have a say in what ‘their thing’ is, in this context? UK law protects “academic freedom” – ‘the principle that academic staff are free within the law to question and test received wisdom, and put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or the privileges they may have at their university’¹⁰² – but this does not mean academic work should evade scrutiny of any kind, or that these (perceived) peculiar privileges and responsibilities of academic life should never be questioned. Many different liberties may be interpreted as falling within scope of academic freedom entitlements; some may be a matter more of ideology than legality.

¹⁰¹ N. Herman et al., “‘Entering the World of Academia Is Like Starting a New Life’: A Trio of Reflections from Health Professionals Joining Academia as Second Career Academics,” *International Journal for Academic Development* 26, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1784742>.

¹⁰² Office for Students, “Freedom to question, challenge and debate,” 15 December, 2022, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/freedom-to-question-challenge-and-debate/#::~:~:text=Academic%20freedom%3A%20This%20is%20the,may%20have%20at%20their%20university.>

Conclusions

The questions asked above and throughout this article are largely hypothetical: this is not an apologia of neoliberalism. However, there are some problems with anti-neoliberal rhetoric, especially in HE where the habitual, occupational valorisation of a negative iteration of critical thinking, not always turned back upon itself, can risk discrediting its objections by drawing them in broad, lazy strokes. Policies, processes, and practices grouped under the neoliberal banner may make for a challenging workplace both within and beyond academia, may create certain inequalities in HE even as they dismantle others, and institutions and the custodians of them may deserve our suspicion for a plethora of reasons. Nevertheless, the solidarity that comes from excluding those do not ‘wear the uniform’ of ‘let’s moan a lot about academia’ (P18) – from attenuating to the negative, encouraging cynical disillusionment, shoring up conflict with colleagues – also, perversely, contributes to working environments characterised by hostility, insecurity, and isolation. The apparent collectivity stemming from a shared fantasy of besiegement likewise potentially ignores the reality that regardless of how contemporary academia compares to a romanticised past version of itself, it remains a privileged space compared to other sectors, with work that allows for greater autonomy and personal investment than most types of labour. This is not to say there are not problems – but let us not overstate them or undervalue the benefits.

In my current research I have interviewed graduate teaching assistants, and it has been a stark discovery that of 11 doctoral participants only one intends to pursue an academic career; the rest plan escapes into industry. Their impressions of academic life are that it is miserable: competitive, overworked, and requiring too much martyrdom in order to succeed. This could be evidence of the evils enacted by neoliberalism, but it can also operate as a sobering reflection of the atmosphere we collectively project as we model what an academic career looks like to our junior colleagues. Over half the participants in 2018 actively warned their students away from HE, yet the idea that only the privileged or psychopathically resilient can survive academia produces the very exclusions it recognises; the more “normal” people we frighten away, the more HE becomes dominated by those who are happy to submit to a “neoliberal” life, further perpetuating the prevailing norms. This parallels P8’s frustration towards the armchair critics who refuse to take on management responsibilities; our inactions have consequences, and we are all unintentional role models.

This article has suggested that the language of neoliberalism, though ubiquitous, may not be the most productive framing for critiques of contemporary

UK academia, or, indeed, as Rodgers' questions earlier in the article suggest, useful terminology at all. I would hazard a suggestion that this new lexicon with which to describe the status quo is not always a 'sign of a new acuteness about the way the world operates'¹⁰³ but can be a hologram of social and political acuity that both occludes the particularities to our critique and disguises the lack of them. By demonstrating the shortcomings of the concept I have illustrated that its diffuse nature debars engagement with specific and nuanced issues in HE, leading to a tendency towards generic, abstract fist-shaking that may strengthen rather than undermine neoliberal discourse. I have proposed that this, in conjunction with the common perception of a narrow kind of critical thinking as an ideal academic trait, incentivises performances of negativity among academics, most readily observed through collective investment in a besiegement narrative that finds expression through hostility towards institutions and those with responsibility for running them. While solidarity through perceived oppression may be unifying in some respects and coalesce into formalised union actions such as labour strikes, I have argued it also reproduces exclusions and can perpetuate a joyless working environment from which little good arises and little change manifests.

Some would suggest that we must be a "killjoy" when pointing to discrimination, inequalities, or structural power imbalances; perhaps even that it is necessary to orientate primarily to problems with the status quo in order to catalyse activism. Indeed, it is easy to find that place of complaint both within ourselves and amongst our allies when there are so many injustices to witness, and easier still to persuade ourselves that righteous indignation equates to action – but is it helpful, really, beyond communicating our political position, and is the logical extension of our arguments always as progressive as our anti-neoliberal stance would have us believe? Promoting gratitude culture, conservatism, or the many phenomena associated with neoliberalism is not my *modus operandi*. You do not need to overlook the injuries of late capitalism, in academia or anywhere else: acknowledge them, admit them, feel them – but not to the exclusion of the rest. Remember joy – and participants did share pleasures as well as complaints, albeit in smaller proportion – remember excitement, remember why you chose this path in the first place and why you are still on it now. Remember why HE is important enough to spend your limited energy critiquing it, but also look beyond and consider how we might model doing academia sustainably, contentedly, so that we encourage in the very people we need more of, who otherwise may see our disheartenment and veer away, alienated by 'the club'.

¹⁰³ Rodgers, "Uses," 78.

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