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Action and ‘Civil Death’ in the Securitised University: A Comment on Jana Bacevic’s
‘Knowing Neoliberalism’

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I read Jana Bacevic’s article, ‘Knowing Neoliberalism’, shortly after completing a series of challenging interviews with Turkish academics, recently fired or under investigation for signing the [Academics for Peace petition](#). It seemed that calling for an end to the “massacre and deportation of Kurdish and other peoples” in Southeast Turkey was an unforgivable offense—punishable by ‘civil death’. While mulling over this complexity, I found Bacevic’s (2019) arguments helpful in framing the wider implications of this severe response to a small and primarily symbolic political act.

In brief, my current research questions how political expression is shaped by conditions of securitisation and surveillance in Istanbul and Cape Town. A large part of the study emphasises how activist academics and students negotiate the landscape of higher education, which is shifting in response to various economic and political pressures (Bose and Dillabough 2019). Yet such issues of surveillance, constricting cultures of ideological possibility, and backlashes to political movement within the academy are not alien to the UK (Gordon and Bose forthcoming) or other liberal-leaning democracies, indicating the significance of investigating the phenomenon of the securitised academic with a transnational lens. In many ways, this response represents an effort to further understand the pragmatic and epistemological constraints on academics facing the global security and highly advanced neoliberal nexus, and in a more optimistic tone, question the potential spaces for action that may contain revolutionary possibilities.

I primarily focus on two points from ‘Knowing Neoliberalism’: first, the scholastic fallacy that knowledge about power relations is equal to power, and second, the necessity of re-engaging with collective political action to challenge the ubiquity of both an advanced and politically sanctioned neoliberalism, as it reimagine the academy in its own eyes, and seeks to create academic subjects in its own image, sometimes referred to as competitive authoritarianism. Additionally, I see Bacevic’s links between surveillance and neoliberalism as a necessary frame to examine academia in the security state. She positions neoliberalism as an epistemic subject that fundamentally altered ways of knowing through, for example, surveillance capitalism.

Surveillance technologies and their popular usage are one of the primary means for shoring up power for the security apparatus which emerge as normative conditions for our daily data-producing habits for ensuring successful monitoring practices. In practical terms, this means that social media outputs of activists and academics have been followed by security forces in both Turkey and South Africa. In other words, the ways in which we are known by the state are directly influenced by neoliberal processes, only one of which is data privacy.

The following sections represent a preliminary analysis of data collected over 9 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul and Cape Town. Due to the scope of this response, I primarily draw from the Istanbul case study. The individuals interviewed include academics, academic activists, and student activists, some of whom were Peace Signatories, and others who participated in efforts against the rapid commercialisation, urbanisation, and deforestation of Istanbul, identified as actively feminist and/or pro-Kurdish liberation.

Pariahs or Progressives?

The impacts of neoliberal restructuring on the academy, including metrics and evaluation cultures, the ‘publish or perish’ idiom and the more recent ‘funding or famine’ paradigm (see McGinn et al. 2019), and increased competition have been well documented in various scholarly efforts. These factors take on new meanings when combined with the integration of security and surveillance logic in the academy. The resulting environment of fear and self-censorship must be understood within the wider frame of both economic and political precarity and are central to the ideological framings and social conditions underlying advanced neoliberalism.

While interviewing academics and students I would frequently ask, ‘What is your greatest fear [when engaging in political action]?’ The answer was usually a version of ‘I will lose my job’. Those who named prison as their primary fear elaborated that the threat of prison was intractably tied to the fact that a criminal record would preclude any possibility of keeping or getting an academic job post-prison. In Turkey, if an individual is under investigation or charged with acts against the government, they can face harsh crackdowns including the loss of health insurance (which causes widespread ineligibility for employment), the withdrawal of passports and therefore the erasure of their civic legitimacy, or the refusal to renew contract academic appointments (signifying the political importance of temporary labour practices in the academy). Recipients of this form of brutality often termed this state directive as a ‘civil death’. An individual experiencing ‘civil death’ is isolated from the features of daily life and cast as an outsider—expelled and exiled from the public life (see also Sassen 2018). Additionally, association with such individuals may lead to a form of contamination in which the surrounding social relations can also be subjected to state surveillance. While many of these individuals elected to continue engaging in political action, they were undoubtedly struck by the violent character of such a society, seen most clearly by those who were deprived, as Hannah Arendt so aptly remarked, of their ‘right to have rights’.

More specifically, to experience ‘civil death’ is to be forced to become what Arendt (1943) terms a ‘conscious pariah’. Yet, in the securitised state—what role is there for the pariah, eternally monitored by the security apparatus lest a political move be made? Frequently, the result is prison, legal charges (terrorism or insulting the President), joblessness, and expulsion from the socioeconomic system. As such, the ‘pariah’ is forced into exile or displacement and therefore removed from the public sphere as a legitimate actor. If one way of challenging neoliberalism and its discontents is collective action—how do we understand the shrinking scope of possibilities within the security state where the risks of collective action are incalculable? In most cases, the solution was to find avenues for political expression within the framework of the academic profession.

During interviews the spectre of ‘civil death’ would haunt our discussions—the ever-present possibility of irrelevance, expulsion, and the social humiliation of financial struggle and the loss of professional identity. Most interviewees claimed that their remaining mechanism of political expression was through academia, albeit with heavy self-censorship. They also

expressed feelings of hope and a set of moral imperatives that perhaps someday this intellectual work and political critique would carry effects or could be useful. These affective registers were often coupled with signs of resignation and even despair indicating a perception that this was highly unlikely. Simultaneously, participants would frequently hold on to the idea that posting information on social media may bring change through raising awareness or, to put this differently, spreading critique. However, many named the ambiguity that lies between reading critique and mobilisation. There is a clear disjuncture in our orientation towards the relationship between knowledge and political action—one fraught with contradiction, uncertainty, and a fragile hope resting upon the desire to act—with fundamental desires to avoid an early ‘civil death’.

These academics turned towards the logic of the market, often ashamedly and with full awareness of the political implications. Many saw the pursuit of overseas jobs as the only realistic potential, and therefore worked towards the stringent and competitive requirements of international universities, hoping for a chance at security. A prominent strategy is a combination of chasing publications, promotions and small personal victories such as critical pieces published in English (most hope that their work in English will remain under the radar). For much of this time they would live in waiting—a kind of static frozen time. Participants repeatedly expressed the hope that things would change, citing other examples in history where regimes were toppled, and new freedoms could be expressed. However, this waiting was not done in silence. Many found avenues to champion diversity, pro-environment policies, and women’s rights, thus fitting neatly, though perhaps unjustly, into Fraser’s (2019) definition of the ‘progressive neoliberal’. Regardless of the contradictions of this term, at least some form of action seemed plausible.

Importantly, none of this is a criticism or value judgement upon the action or inaction of any participants or academics. My own perspectives emerge within the context of the UK, while flawed and in many ways facing its own crises of the state, is still a space of professional privilege which engenders a form of freedom of expression, even if it considered to be under threat. As such, my interest is in developing a deeper comparative understanding of the conditions and constraints for activists in order to contribute towards ongoing conversations on the nature and potential of transnational solidarity.

The Triad of Inaction

Drawing from a range of interviews as well as experience in the UK higher education system, one perspective emerges that suggests many academics are caught in a triad of inaction, underpinned by a broader neoliberal rationality. Together, the features of precarity, security, and the scholastic fallacy form three walls that enclose the academic in an apolitical space. On one side, the academic subject is blocked through the imminent threat of prison—the overt denial of freedom enforced through surveillance practices and intentionally randomised state-led investigations to discourage political inclinations. On the other side, the academic is coerced into a competitive rat race—monitored and starred in hierarchical evaluation frameworks in order to maintain their livelihood while facing the

ever-present spectre of unemployment and redundancy. In doing so, one of the most valuable political resources is given up—Time.

To fulfill the unmet desire towards political expression in tandem with the economic need to prove oneself an industrious and effective worker—the academic turns toward the production of critique. Here, and with great caution, the academic is able to interact within the realm of politics—create ‘speech acts’, interpret social reality and strive to challenge the hegemonic construction of the current global order. However, they must do so as an individual and at the expense of both personal and collective freedoms that lie beyond the academy. At this point, the academic hits the third wall. Through the scholastic fallacy that knowledge production/critique equates with political action, alongside the aforementioned barriers, no further efforts of mobilisation are, or can be, made. Exponential amounts of critique are published, yet collective political expression remains underdeveloped. Thus, the academic finds themselves perpetually operating within this triad of inaction that appears and flourishes within conditions of HE privatisation, new managerialisms and growing private sector institutions.

Action?

This final section engages with Bacevic’s entreaty for a revitalisation of collective political action (Arendtian) to challenge the pervasiveness of neoliberal logic. However, as we have seen, many existing projects of political action have been met with harsh state crackdowns, indicating both the need to develop new forms of political expression (that transcend borders), and the continued significance of mobilisation. In many ways state violence marks what it perceives to be the greatest threats to its underlying rationality. In the initial example of the Academics for Peace Petition, the collective commitment of academics, normally dismissed as [elitist intellectuals](#) through populist rhetoric, deviating from their expected apoliticality was sufficient to garner over [700 criminal charges](#). If a singular petition, though on a highly sensitive topic, is able to warrant such a reaction—what might the political potential of other forms of collective action by the professoriate be? How might we reimagine our shared political and historical responsibilities if action was considered within the realm of the transnational? What shared issues may serve as threads of connection beyond our national and intellectual boundaries—thus providing the impetus to organise with those that we may never know?

The transnational occurrence of such political and economic pressures hint that resistance must logically be most effective as a transnational counter force. However, in order to avoid the scholastic fallacy, such action must operate outside of the conditions of neoliberalism, or rather beyond its organizing features. By considering Graeber’s (2007) call to develop alternative theories of action, we can find additional value in engaging directly with the nebulous theoretical chasm between knowledge production and collective political action. In this manner, we may operate against the current ‘crisis of hegemony’ (Fraser 2019) by focusing instead on the how of academic political action as opposed to the what. Again, following Graeber (2007), we may find potential in the creation of new social forms, placed in the context of the academy—new forms and methods of knowledge production (which

many scholars currently endeavour towards) that fundamentally seek to relate to action in a manner that undermine both neoliberal rationality and micro-practices of competition. Considering Bacevic's call to action, we find ourselves asking who we are as public actors, and who we might become as knowledge-makers amidst rising political conflict and instability?

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