17 Breaking the silence

The hidden injuries of the neoliberal university

Rosalind Gill

Introduction

How are you?

I am totally stressed at the moment, to be honest. Work is piling up and I'm just drowning. I don't know when I'm going to have time to start on that secrecy and silence book chapter – I'm so, so late with it now, and I feel really bad that I'm letting Róisín down, but I literally never have a second.

I know, I know exactly what you mean.

I mean, I had 115 e-mails yesterday and they all needed answering. I'm doing 16-hour days just trying to keep on top of it. I feel like I'm always late with everything, and my 'to do' list grows faster than I can cross things off it. It's like one of those fungi in a horror movie that doubles in size every few hours! (Laughter) And I never ever have chance to do any of my own work. I'm sleeping really badly and it all just feels completely out of control ...

It's the same for me. Reading? What's that? Thinking? No chance! And you feel *awful*, don't you. With me I feel like I'm constantly stealing time from the kids too – I'll go off to check messages in the middle of a game of Monopoly or something. Sometimes I just feel like quitting.

Yeah I know. It just gets worse. Still hoping to win the lottery, then? (Laughter) But how *are* you?

Do you really want to know?! (Laughter) (Yeh) well, awful actually. I'm really fed up. I heard yesterday that my article for x journal was turned down. (Oh *no*!) You know, the one I worked on for ages and ages. I poured so much of myself into that piece (I know). And one of the referee's comments was vile – it said something like 'my first year undergraduates have a better understanding of the field than this author does – why are they wasting all of our time'. When I read it it was like a slap in the face, Ros. It was all I could do not to burst out crying in the postroom, but I had a lecture right afterwards so I somehow managed to pull myself together and go and do that. But last night, I just didn't sleep (Poor you) I just kept on going over and over with all these negative comments ringing round my head. And you know the worst thing is, they are right: I *am* useless (No you're not),

> I'm a complete fraud, and I should have realised that I was going to be found out if I sent my work to a top journal like that.

This is a transcript of a conversation I had with a female friend in the few days before (finally) beginning work on this chapter. Both speakers are white, both work in 'old' (pre-1992) British universities and both are employed on 'continuing' contracts – thus are already marked as 'privileged' in multiple ways in the contemporary academy. Mine is easily recognisable as the voice which worries about how late this article is! Some readers may find this fragment of conversation rather odd, but I suspect for many more it will appear familiar and may strike deep chords of recognition. It speaks of many things: exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy. These feelings, these affective embodied experiences, occupy a strange position in relation to questions of secrecy and silence. They are at once ordinary and everyday, yet at the same time remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy. They are spoken in a different, less privileged register; they are the stuff of the chat in the corridor, coffee-break conversations and intimate exchanges between friends, but not, it would seem, the keynote speech or the journal publication or even the departmental meeting. For all the interest in reflexivity in recent decades, the *experiences of academics* have somehow largely escaped critical attention. It is as if the parameters for reflexivity are bounded by the individual study, leaving the institutional context in which academic knowledge is produced simply as a taken for granted backdrop.

What would it mean to turn our lens upon our own labour processes, organisational governance and conditions of production? What would we find if, instead of studying others, we focussed our gaze upon our own community, and took as our data not the polished publication or the beautifully crafted talk, but the unending flow of communications and practices in which we are all embedded and enmeshed, often reluctantly: the proliferating e-mails, the minutes of meetings, the job applications, the peer reviews, the promotion assessments, the drafts of the RAE narrative, the committee papers, the student feedback forms, even the after-seminar chats? How might we make links between macro-organisation and institutional practices on the one hand, and experiences and affective states on the other, and open up an exploration of the ways in which these may be gendered, racialised and classed? How might we engage critically with the multiple moments in which individuals report being at breaking point, say 'my work is crap' or 'I'm going to be found out' – as well as those moments of gratuitous attack and cruelty, so often seen – for example – in anonymised referee processes (yet rarely challenged) – and connect these feelings with neoliberal practices of power in the Western university? In short, how might we begin to understand the secrets and silences within our own workplaces, and the different ways in which they matter?

I cannot hope to address all these questions in this short piece, but it feels important – indeed urgent – to put them on the agenda. This is not an exercise in self-indulgence or narcissism or even an opportunity to have a good moan – for part of what interests me is precisely how the strata of communication, of which the conversation above is an example, remains hearable *as* a 'moan', as an expression of complaint or unhappiness, rather than being formulated as an analysis or a (political) demand for change. Rather this chapter is the beginning of an attempt to redress our own collective silence, our failure to look critically at 'our own back yard', with the broad aim of understanding the relationship between economic and political shifts, transformations in work and psychosocial experiences – and starting a conversation about how we might resist.

Situating the experiences

It seems to me that four different literatures are pertinent to this project. First, there is the extensive literature about the transformation of work, writing about which shades into social theory more generally, with accounts of late capitalism, network society, liquid modernity, knowledge society, or post-Fordism (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Sennett, 2006). Key themes include a stress upon risk, individualisation, insecurity and rapid technological change leading to the need for constant updating and reskilling (the requirement to become what Manuel Castells (1996) calls 'reprogrammable labour'). The recent upsurge of interest in cultural labour represents a particularly relevant subset of this literature which is arguably more empirically informed than general accounts and examines the experiences of work in cultural industries such as web design, television, film or fashion. Studies have highlighted a number of relatively stable features of this kind of work: a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g. web designer, artist, fashion designer); an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal working environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields (Ursell, 2000; Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2003; Ross, 2003; Banks, 2007; Gill and Pratt, 2008). These findings seem to resonate powerfully with many of the predominantly secret or silenced features of life in the contemporary Western university.

A second, but much smaller, body of work is the literature about structural transformations in higher education, which highlights the increasing corporatisation and privatisation of the university, and the impacts of this (Graham, 2002; Washburn, 2003; Evans, 2005). These include the importing of corporate models of management into university life; the reformulation of the very

nature of education in instrumental terms connected to business and the economy; the transformation of students into 'consumers'; and the degradation of pay and working conditions for academics, as well as the increasing casualisation of employment, yet with little organised resistance from trade unions or other bodies. Critical work (and not all of this writing could be considered so; some of it is merely nostalgic for the era of elitist values and the 'gentleman scholar') speaks of the 'corporate university' and of 'academic capitalism', and considers the takeover of higher education by a logic of the market.

Third, scholarship concerned with the micro-politics of power in the academy is also highly pertinent to this project (Gillies and Lucey, 2007). Often feminist in orientation, and also sometimes informed by psychoanalytic thinking, this work challenges the popular image of the 'ivory tower' as 'a rarefied haven of detached reasoning and refined culture' (ibid.: 1) to look instead at the operation of power at different levels and in contradictory ways in the contemporary university. Power is understood relationally and this work also directs attention to unconscious forces in operation at both institutional and interpersonal levels. What is particularly valuable is the emphasis upon the small-scale, micro-negotiations of power in the academy – from the dynamics of a PhD supervision, to discussions about workload or promotion.

Finally it would seem that Foucaultian-inspired writing about neoliberalism represents another important source for thinking about contemporary working life in the academy. Key concepts include the notion of 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin, 2000), the idea that individuals are now increasingly required to tell the story of their lives as if they were the outcome of deliberative planning and choice (Rose, 1990; Walkerdine et al., 2001), and the critical interrogation of 'audit culture' with its attendant obligation to make everything 'auditable', rendered knowable and calculable in terms of quantifiable 'outputs' (Power, 1994; Strathern, 2000). Extending from discussions of economic rationality, critical scholarship about neoliberalism directs our attention to new and emerging forms of discipline, which operate as technologies of selfhood that bring into being the endlessly self-monitoring, planning, prioritising 'responsibilised' subject required by the contemporary university. She requires little management, but can be accorded the 'autonomy' to manage herself, in a manner that is a far more effective exercise of power than any imposed from above by employers.

In combination these distinct literatures have much to teach us about the changing nature of academic labour, but what is needed, I want to suggest, is an approach that can *think them together* in such a way as to explore the relations between transformations in capitalism, new forms of governmentality and psychosocial experiences of working in the university. In attempting this, I begin from *experiences* in the academy – experiences that are often kept secret or silenced, that don't have 'proper channels' of communication. My 'data' are entirely unscientific, but nevertheless, I contend, they tell us something real and significant about our own workplaces. They

consist of conversations and e-mails from friends or colleagues, university memos, letters from journal editors and other 'fragments' from daily life (all anonymised except where they are mine) collected over a period of one year. I wanted to start from experiences, rather than from theory or from accounts of changes in capitalism, work or higher education, because – despite all the contestation around that term, particularly within feminism – it seems to me that it is this level that remains silenced in most fora – yet insistently asserts itself in our aching backs, tired eyes, difficulties in sleeping and in our multiple experiences of stress, anxiety and overload.

Precarious lives

> Don't get me wrong, I'm really glad to have this job, but because the contract is so short – again – I'm going to have to start looking for another one more or less right away.
>
> (Career early academic, 30s, on one-year contract for the third time)

> I'm actually doing four part-time jobs at the moment. It was only going to be three – which was just about manageable – but then someone went off sick at x (university) and they asked me to step in. I know it's mad, but there's just no way I could turn it down because they might be one of my only chances of getting a full-time job next year. So I've got to show willing and get my foot in the door. But I'm telling you, it's really killing me – you should see my timetable, and on Thursdays I'm doing like 400 miles going between jobs, and when I'm sitting in the car I am just so stressed, my knuckles are white on the steering wheel, and I keep thinking that if I hit traffic or there's an accident or something the whole thing will completely fall apart and I'll have blown it.
>
> (New post-doc, 30s)

> I've been killing myself trying to finish this paper, because if I don't get it into a good journal they won't enter me into the RAE, and if that happens I can forget about promotion altogether, and my days are probably numbered. Teaching-only contract here I come! I feel like I'm clinging on by my fingernails.
>
> (Lecturer, 40s)

Precariousness is one of the defining experiences of contemporary academic life – particularly, but not exclusively, for younger or 'career early' staff (a designation that can now extend for one's entire 'career', given the few opportunities for development or secure employment.) Statistical data about the employment patterns of academics shows the wholesale transformation of higher education over the last decades, with the systematic casualisation of the workforce. Continuing contracts – understood in the US as tenure-track appointments – now represent only just over half of academic posts, with 38

per cent of all academics in higher education on fixed-term contracts in 2006–7 (Court and Kinman, 2008). While, in the past, short-term contracts were largely limited to research positions and tied to specific, time-limited projects, today they also characterise teaching posts which are frequently offered on a one-year temporary basis at the bottom of the pay scale. However, even these posts constitute the 'aristocracy of labour' when compared to the proliferation of short-term, part-time teaching positions, contracted on an hourly paid basis, in which PhD students or new postdocs are charged with delivering mass undergraduate programmes, with little training, inadequate support and rates of pay that – when preparation and marking are taken into account – frequently fall (de facto) below the minimum wage and make even jobs in cleaning or catering look like attractive pecuniary options. Alongside such jobs is the newly created stratum of 'teaching fellowships' in which, as a cost-cutting measure for university management, work once rewarded with a lectureship is repackaged for lower pay, stripped of benefits (e.g. pension) and any sense of obligation or responsibility to the employee, and offered purely on a term-time basis, frequently leaving teaching fellows without any source of income over the summer.

There is much that can – and should – be said (angrily) about this – about the HE policies of successive governments, about the complicity of relatively secure staff in this erosion of pay and conditions for their colleagues, about the failure of a collective response to the decimation of a profession, indeed of a vision of the university and intellectual work itself. But what also needs discussion are our *experiences* of this kind of precariousness. How is the 'brave new world of work' elaborated by social theorists (Beck, 2000) experienced by those who live it in academia? What are the *costs* of the shift from relatively secure work to poorly paid, informal and discontinuous employment? The extracts presented here speak of some of these. They include chronic anxiety and stress brought about by long hours, high costs of travelling and the inability to plan ahead because of endemic insecurity about one's position. The Health and Safety Executive calculates that 13.8 million working days annually are lost to work-related stress, anxiety and depression, and the University and College Union's 2008 survey found academics reporting 'very high stress levels, considerably higher than average', which had increased from earlier surveys in 1998 and 2004 (Court and Kinman, 2008). Despite their profound impact upon our lives, these things are rarely spoken of within the academy, and, if they are, they tend to be treated as individual, personal experiences rather than structural features of the contemporary university. Moreover, academics are notoriously bad at talking about (poor) pay, perhaps seeing mention of it somehow as calling into question their commitment or integrity. As Andrew Ross (2000) has argued, the academic's refusal to grubby his or her hands with talk about money is related to the idea of scholarship as a 'noble' calling or vocation – a fact that is probably not unrelated to our failure over many decades to secure pay deals that even keep

pace with inflation. Financial hardship can be masked – and rendered difficult to speak of – by academics' educational and cultural capital.

It is perhaps the same 'sacrificial' ethos that silences accounts of the personal costs of insecure and precarious work within universities. Having to commute long distances, or to live apart from partner and friends, are among these, as we become an increasingly mobile, fragmented workforce. Another cost for some is not being able to have children. This impacts disproportionately on female academics who, it would appear, are significantly less likely to have children than both their male counterparts in academia, and women in other types of employment (Probert, 2005; Nakhaie, 2007). Part of this difference may be accounted for in terms of the lower numbers of female academics who *want* children, but recognition of this should not blind us to the fact that increasing numbers also feel unable to do so and sustain an academic career, either because the length of time it takes to get a secure job (degree, Master's, PhD, series of temporary contracts) makes it too late, or because the intense day-to-day demands of contemporary academic employment make it extremely difficult to manage. A study at the University of California found that women academics with children were working 100 hours per week, when housework and childcare were added to academic labour (Mason et al., 2006). It might be argued that the rapid influx of women into academic positions within universities in the last 30 years has come at the cost – for some of them – of having families. This resonates × are trends towards gender equality, but in which more complex forms of discrimination and inequality are emerging.

Fast academia: the intensification and extensification of work

> NB In completing the online form, please do not enter a total number of hours greater than 37 per week, as this will cause the form to be void. If you have worked more than 37 hours in the relevant week, please enter your responses as percentages of time worked, not as hours.
>
> (Guidance to staff on completing the TRAC form, x University, 2007)

> I think I'm a bit too either addicted or compulsive about it or obsessive about it ... I worry that I'm going to miss something that I ought to be attending to, I worry that if I leave it for a day, then I'm going to come back and then just have 60 or 70 e-mails at the end of the day ... so to that extent my e-mails are completely Sisyphean. It is never ending. It's like my To Do list. I'm down from 70 things to do on my To Do list to 30, but that 30 keeps on – it's a perpetual 30.
>
> (Male professor, 61 – quoted in Gregg, 2009)

A punishing intensification of work has become an endemic feature of academic life. Again, serious discussion of this is hard to find either within or outside universities, yet it is impossible to spend any significant amount of

time with academics without quickly gaining an impression of a profession overloaded to breaking point, as a consequence of the underfunded expansion of universities over the last two decades, combined with hyperinflation of what is demanded of academics, and an audit culture that, if it was once treated with scepticism, has now been almost perfectly internalised. (Indeed, as I write this, I'm being informed by email of the need to be 'REF-ready', even before the terms of the new research assessment audit – the so-called Research Excellence Framework – have been announced).

The intensification of academics' labour is borne out not only by anecdotal evidence (of which most academics could supply reams) but by all the available research on working hours. A report by the TUC in 2005 (quoted in Court and Kinman, 2008) found that academics and teachers were more likely than any other occupational group to do unpaid overtime. A large proportion were working hours in excess of the European Working Time Directive, and 42 per cent said that they regularly worked evenings and weekends in order to cope with the demands of their job. The reason given was very simple: the volume of work demanded of them. This is like an 'open secret'. Indeed, awareness of it on the part of those managing universities meant a change to auditing procedures that was, quite literally, built into the software of the TRAC system for monitoring how academics append their time (see above). This made it impossible for staff to record the total number of hours worked, if these exceeded those for which they were nominally contracted. In this way, academics' working hours were systematically and quite deliberately rendered invisible, operating as a silencing mechanism.

There are of course a whole range of much more subtle and pernicious techniques for silencing complaints and neutering resistance, which operate at the micro level of 'collegial' relations, as well as within the academic subject himself or herself. One female lecturer told me:

> I was at breaking point. I went to see my mentor to complain about my workload. I mean, I'm really, really conscientious – you know that – and my mentor just said: 'Welcome to modern academia. We're *all* working these crazy hours. I'm sorry to be blunt, but you know what you have to do: if it's too hot, get out the kitchen.'

The 'kitchen' of academia is, it would seem, too hot for almost everyone, but this has not resulted in collective action to turn down the heat, but instead to an overheated competitive atmosphere in which acts of kindness, generosity and solidarity often seem to continue only in spite of, rather than because of, the governance of universities. Increasingly, requests to perform activities that would once have been considered part of the 'civic' collegial responsibility of being a university lecturer (such as examining PhDs, refereeing articles or reviewing grant proposals) take on a tone of pleading desperation, as journal editors or course managers find no one prepared to do the necessary work. This is a collective, structural problem that is a direct result of workloads

which leave many people with no 'slack' to take on *anything* beyond that which is directly required of them. Yet once again there is no discussion of this as an institutional or organisational issue. Instead universities 'help' staff to deal with these new intensified conditions with a barrage of 'training courses' (most of which we have no time to attend) which cover topics such as 'time management', 'speed reading' and 'prioritising goals', and require each individual to work on the self to better manage proliferating workloads, as if there were a technical fix (*oh it'll all be alright if I only check emails once a day – why didn't I think of that?! I'll just pick all 115 of them up at 5 o'clock then I can stay up all night answering them!*), while actively refusing any 'reality check' on the sustainability of contemporary academic workloads.

This is particularly ironic given that academics hardly need any *more* training to perfect their polished self-discipline and self governance! We appear, on the contrary, to be model neoliberal subjects whose working practices and 'psychic habitus' (to stretch Bourdieu a little towards my psychosocial concerns) constitute us as self-regulating, calculating, conscientious and responsibilised. The 'freedom', 'flexibility' and 'autonomy' of neoliberal forms of governmentality have proved far more effective for extracting 'surplus value,' or at least vastly more time spent working than any older modalities of power (though, of course, feudal and other forms co-exist quite comfortably with these in the operation of universities).

Meanwhile, critical of yet trapped within the same logic of individual solutions and techniques of the self, I ask my friends how they cope with things such as daily requests to referee articles (I'm looking for ideas to help me deal with this): 'I only referee for journals I'm on the editorial board for'; 'I do 20 each year and when I've done those 20 I resolutely refuse any more'; 'I look at the topic and will only do it if it is very close to my own interests'; and so on. I am struck by the amount of thought and emotional labour has gone into this: so many different responses, so many carefully thought through personal strategies, so much energy invested in navigating a course between being a good ethical 'citizen' of academia, and *surviving* – that is, not going under, getting sick or giving up one's own work entirely. But all of this is almost entirely secret, a panoply of privatised responses for managing the unmanageable.

And it misses too all the emotional costs that come not only from work done, but also from work not done. A colleague asks me to examine his student's PhD. I agonise for two days: I want to help out, it sounds an interesting thesis, it feels important ethically and politically to do this stuff, and I know the student really wanted me as her examiner ... but I am already examining two other PhDs that month, I'm behind on everything, my mum's ill, and I can feel I'm getting close to that place where I will collapse. ... Deep breath: I say, 'No, sorry, I can't do it'. I am immediately flooded with guilt, I feel a bit shabby, a little bit less than the human being I want to be; I try not to think about the student's disappointment.

Always on: academia without walls

Alongside the intensification of work in academia, we are also experiencing its marked extensification (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006) across time and space. Paradoxically, as university lecturers have increasingly reported that noise, open-plan offices, interruptions and student demands mean that 'you can't work at work' everywhere else has opened up as a potential site for academic labour! How convenient. Autonomous Marxist writers call this the era of the 'socialised worker' and the 'factory without walls', a phase of capitalism in which labour is deterritorialsed so that 'the whole society is placed at the disposal of profit' (Negri, 1989: 79). Work in today's universities is, it would seem, *academia without walls*. This is the outcome of multiple determinants but is facilitated by information and communication technologies that render it possible to be 'always on' (Gregg, 2009)

Ever speeded-up mobile technologies intermesh seamlessly with the psychic habitus and dispositions of the neoliberal academic subject: checking, monitoring, downloading whether from BL (British Library), beach or bed, trying desperately to keep up and 'stay on top'. Two things are striking about Gregg's data (interviews with white-collar workers in Australia) as well as my own more informal conversations with academic colleagues and friends. First, there is the palpable *anxiety* that pulsates through these accounts: anxiety about falling behind, missing something important, going under. And second is the way in which this is framed almost entirely in individualistic discourse. Once again, it would seem that these are privatised anxieties that are understood to reflect on the value and worth of the individual, rather than the values of the institutions that make intolerable demands. Indeed, it is notable how much self-contempt runs through such accounts, and the way they draw on the language of pathology. In the extract that begins this section, the male professor characterises himself as variously 'addicted', 'obsessive' and 'compulsive' when he might more accurately be seen as enacting quite reasonable strategies in order to cope with an entirely unreasonable workload. 'Addiction' metaphors suffuse academics' talk of their relationship to e-mail, even as they report such high levels of anxiety that they feel they have to check e-mails first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and in which time away (on sick leave, on holiday) generates fears of what might be lurking in the inbox when they return. Again, inventive 'strategies' abound for keeping such anxiety at bay, e.g. putting on your 'out of office' reply when you are actually in the office.

However, it is not only the always-on culture of e-mails that has led to the marked intensification of our workloads and the almost constant experience of high levels of stress. In fact, it is paradoxical given how much time we spend on it, that e-mail is mostly experienced as what stops us getting on with our 'real' work – which is itself intensifying all the time, as a consequence of what Gregg (2009) calls 'function creep' – the requirement to do more with less. In teaching, for example, it is no longer enough to give a lecture and run

some seminars, we are also expected to produce a set of resources for use on the new online communications platforms such as WebCT, Blackboard and Moodle. 'It is not acceptable simply to upload your lecture notes', comes the guidance from one university. 'We encourage you to use WebCT *creatively*, with quizzes, hyperlinks, visual materials, etc. To learn more about the potential of WebCT for innovative teaching, come along to one of our training courses.' Oh great, I would think facetiously on receiving yet another memo like this, another training course! And yet the pressure that is produced by such constant exhortations to be more creative, teach more innovatively, be at the cutting edge (etc.) is undeniable – particularly because it meets an *already existing set of desires and ethics* around being professional and wanting to do a good job.

Mostly, though, it is in relation to research that people feel most under pressure for it is here that our 'worth' is most harshly surveilled and assessed, and where we are subject to ever greater scrutiny. For it is not just a matter of whether you publish, but what you publish, where you publish it, how often it is cited, what 'impact factor' the journal has and whether you are 'REF-ready'. Reading Nigel Thrift (2000) on 'fast management' (itself a development from the notion of 'fast capitalism'), I was struck by the parallels with academia: our need to be ever faster, more agile, and with what Thrift calls 'hair trigger responsiveness' so that we are able to adapt to new calls for papers, new funding streams and fit in with every changing fashion on engaging 'research users' and stakeholders. In Thrift's terms, we are subjects who are required to cope with a state of permanent 'emergency as rule'. This is a form of governmentality that is even more pernicious than the notion that 'you are only as good as your last job' (Blair, 2001). Instead, you are only as good as your last paper, and that now has a half life that is shorter than ever. Welcome to fast academia.

Toxic shame

> This paper will be of no interest to readers of x (journal name). Discourse analysis is little more than journalism and I fail to see what contribution it can make to understanding the political process. It is self-evident to everyone except this author that politics is about much more than 'discourse'. What's more, in choosing to look at the speeches of Margaret Thatcher, the author shows his or her complete parochialism. If you are going to do this kind of so-called 'analysis' at least look at the discourse of George Bush.
>
> (Referee 2's comments accompanying journal rejection)

> I haven't been able to tell anyone at work about it. I just feel so humiliated. This will confirm everything they already think about me.
>
> (Lecturer, 40s, on hearing that she had not been successful in getting a grant)

> I coped with it once, Ros, but how can I deal with this again? After two knock-backs for promotion I just don't know if I can carry on. I've worked my balls off for that place, but they've just made me feel like I'm nothing.
>
> (Senior lecturer, 50s, on hearing his promotion application had been rejected for a second time)

The quotation that leads this section is a referee's report I received the first time I ever submitted a paper to a journal, back in 1990. I laughed (bitterly) at the accusation of parochialism from this particular North American journal, and even more at the suggestion that this would be put right by focusing on the US(!). But that was small comfort because mostly I felt belittled, hurt and upset at this dismissive rejection of work that I had thought about, developed and crafted over months of careful scholarship. Maybe I wasn't 'good enough' for academia. I had felt optimistic and proud to have written my first 'proper' academic paper. Eight months later when the rejection letter came, disheartened, I could not bear to look at it again. It remained unpublished and some years passed before I submitted another paper to a journal.

I am older, more experienced, and (a bit) tougher now. But I have witnessed the same thing happening many times to friends and PhD students; seen them crying after opening such letters (as my friend reports at the start of this chapter), looking bewildered, devastated. I often wish I could protect them, but all I can do is try to prepare them for what one former student eloquently describes as part of the (sometimes brutal and dehumanising) process of 'becoming Throsby' (her surname) – that is, achieving full academic citizenship.

For me this raises (at least) two kinds of question. First, what is going on when such hostile and dismissive judgements are made by one's peers? The comments my paper attracted nearly 20 years ago were quite mild and innocuous compared to many I have seen more recently, as journals 'open up' their reviewing processes and send all the reviews to each reviewer. When did it become acceptable to write of a colleague's work 'this is self-indulgent crap' or 'put this manuscript in a drawer and don't ever bother to come back to it' – both comments I have read in the last year on colleagues' work. What are the psychosocial processes that produce this kind of practice? I would argue that this has nothing to do with a notion of 'academic freedom', nor is it merely about intellectual differences or the normal cut and thrust of academic debate – all things that must be preserved – but is produced by the peculiarly toxic conditions of neoliberal academia. To understand it we have to think psychosocially in a way that can connect the pressures, competitiveness and frustrations of contemporary academia with the reviewers' own experiences of being treated with contempt and derision. Might it be an example of repressed rage bursting out as an attack against someone who is not the cause of it? Or is it is better understood, by contrast, as one of the few

sites where academics may feel that they can exercise some power – thus they 'let rip,' occasionally cruelly, under the cloak of guaranteed anonymity.

The second set of questions it generates, however, focus on the 'receiving end' of negative reviews to ask what it is that happens when rejection (itself an absolutely normal, routine feature of academic life) translates so quickly and so readily into what I would suggest is a kind of toxic shame? It is the outcome partly of the particular biographies most of us bring, which may sometimes include struggle, but *always* feature 'doing well' (passing exams, achieving plaudits, winning prizes). Being hard-working, self-motivating and enterprising subjects is what constitutes academics as so perfectly emblematic of this neoliberal moment, but is also part of a psychic landscape in which *not* being successful (or lucky!) (i.e. not being the one in five who gets their research application funded, or the one in 15 whose paper is accepted for publication in the 'good' journal) is misrecognised – or to put that more neutrally, made knowable – in terms of individual (moral) failure.

This individualising discourse devours us like a flesh-eating bacterium, producing its own toxic waste – shame: I'm a fraud, I'm useless, I'm nothing. It is (of course) deeply gendered, racialised and classed, connected to biographies that produce very different degrees of 'entitlement' (or not). This affective response in turn is profoundly silencing and isolating – and how could it be otherwise; we don't want to 'show' our ugly failure, any more than it might already be evident, so we are careful about who we tell of our rejection – a partner, yes, close friends, perhaps, but not (as the above extract illustrates) necessarily one's colleagues, if they are felt to be hostile or competitive rather than solidaristic. When students tell me of receiving a rejection from a journal, they have often kept it secret for some time while they try to process the feelings it has engendered. When I tell them it has happened to me, and to every academic I know, they are surprised, having immediately and automatically internalised the experience as their own shameful failure. Some will have concluded that they really aren't good enough, they can't 'hack it'. But others will have already devised 'solutions': I must try harder, read more widely, understand theory better, and so on – the solution, then, for 'us' good neoliberal subjects, simply to work *even harder*.

Pleasure

All this happens in a context in which not only has the boundary between work and play (or non-work) become completely corroded, but in which we are deeply invested in and passionately attached to work – indeed, we often draw no distinction between our work and ourselves (and again there are powerful parallels with creative workers here). As Angela McRobbie has pointed out in relation to the fashion industry and other creative work,

> professed pleasure in work and indeed passionate attachment to something called 'my own work' where there is the possibility of the

> maximisation of self-expression, provides a compelling status justification but also a disciplinary mechanism for tolerating not just uncertainty and self exploitation but also for staying unprofitably within the creative sector and not abandoning it altogether.

I believe that we could substitute 'academics' for 'creatives' in this powerful analysis without losing any of the force of this argument. We therefore need urgently to think about how some of the pleasures of academic work (or at least a deep love for the 'myth' of what we thought being an intellectual would be like, but often seems at far remove from it) bind us more tightly into a neoliberal regime with ever-growing costs, not least to ourselves. Lauren Berlant's work on 'cruel optimism' may be helpful here in showing how such passionate investment (e.g. in the myth of the academic good life) allows us to survive, whilst simultaneously making things worse.[1]

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at some of the secrets and silences of academic life. I have tried to argue that academia represents an excellent example of the neoliberalisation of the workplace and that academics are, in many ways, model neoliberal subjects, with their endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalisation of new forms of auditing and calculating.

Neoliberalism found fertile ground in academics whose predispositions to 'work hard' and 'do well' meshed perfectly with its demands for autonomous, self-motivating, responsibilised subjects. This is gendered, racialised and classed, too, to be sure, in ways that merit urgent attention that I have been unable to give in this short piece. The lack of resistance to the neoliberalisation of universities is partly a result of these divisive, individualising practices, of the silences around them, of the fact also that people are too exhausted to resist and furthermore do not know *what* to resist or *how* to do so. But it is also understandable, I suggest, in terms of the inherent pleasures and fulfilment that many people derive from their work (when they find time to do it) or at least the promise of/idea of it, as well as to the seductions of relatively autonomous working lives – though this autonomy is eroding fast, as universities import business models which require, for example, that all e-mails be answered within 24 hours, or that academics are present in the office five days a week. In reality, the much-vaunted autonomy often simply means that universities end up extracting even more labour from us for free, as we participate in working lives in which there is often no boundary between work and anything else (if indeed there is anything else).

In this chapter, by focusing on experience, I have tried to show some of the costs of this – highlighting insecurity, stress, anxiety and shame as some significant examples.[2] In this 'emergency as rule' (Thrift, 2000) world, these are some of the secrets, silences and hidden injuries of the neoliberal workplaces we inhabit. The challenge is how we might begin to resist.

Postscript

This chapter almost didn't get written. One reason for this is precisely the working conditions outlined above. However, there was another 'internal' block that almost prevented me from committing these ideas to paper: an anxiety about the seeming narcissism and self-indulgence of such a piece. Part of me felt that merely pointing to some of the 'injuries' of (British) academic life had a somewhat obscene quality to it given our enormous privileges relative to most people in most of the world. As Kate Soper (1991) put it in another context – 'no one is starving you, torturing you or even denying you the price of a tube ticket to a conference about postmodernism'; what right, then, to spend a whole chapter talking about myself/ourselves as if *we* had any real problems?! This feeling was intensified by the fact of writing this in January 2009 as Israel relentlessly bombed the population of the Gaza strip. The times when I was not trying to finish this piece were spent either demonstrating outside the Israeli embassy in London or weeping tears of impotent rage as I witnessed daily the appalling suffering of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians on my screen. Against that context the costs of the neoliberalisation of academia hardly seem a 'worthy' subject for a politically engaged, critical intellectual ...

Yet, of course, this too can become a silencing dynamic, allowing us only to speak of extremes of injustice and suffering, as if the mere fact that others 'have it worse' disentitles one from any kind of criticism, from saying anything about our own experiences. On balance, then, I decided to write it and I hope that the ideas about the psychosocial aspects of neoliberalism that it tries to develop will, ultimately, be seen as part of a wider project to *make intelligible contemporary modalities of power*, and thus as connected ineluctably to the struggle for a better, more just world.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Stephen Court at the University and College Union for his invaluable assistance in obtaining statistical data relating to academic employment and workplace stress. I would also like to thank several friends and colleagues for suggestions and feedback that have been helpful and inspiring. I'm grateful to Mark Banks, Sara Bragg, Kathy Davis, Natalie Fenton, Breda Gray, Melissa Gregg, Clare Hemmings, Gail Lewis, Angela McRobbie, Andy Pratt, Róisín Ryan-Flood, Christina Scharff, Stephanie Taylor and Imogen Tyler. My special appreciation to Bruna Seu for sharing her wit and wisdom about academic life over many years of stimulating and supportive conversations.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Clare Hemmings for drawing my attention to this.

2 I might also, however, have talked about illness, as both morbidity and mortality rates look bleaker and bleaker for our profession, and colleagues report 'I get sick all the time'.

Bibilography

Banks, M. (2007) *The Politics of Cultural Work*, Basingstoke/New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Beck, U. (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Blair, H. (2001) 'You're only as good as your last job': the labour process and labour market in the British film industry. *Work, Employment and Society*, 15, 149–69.

Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London/New York, Verso.

Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, Cambridge, MA, Blackwell.

Court, S. and Kinman, G. (2008) 'Tackling stress in higher education'. London, University and College Union.

Cronin, A. (2000) Consumerism and compulsory individuality: women, will and potential. in Ahmed, S., Kilby, J., Lury, C., McNeil, M. and Skeggs, B. (eds) *Transformations: Thinking through feminism*, London, Routledge.

Evans, M. (2005) *Killing Thinking: The Death of the University*, London, Continuum.

Gill, R. (2002) Cool, creative and egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work in Europe. *Information, Communication and Society*, 5, 70–89.

Gill, R. and Pratt, A. (2008) In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 25, 1–30.

Gillies, v. and Lucey, H. (eds) (2007) *Power, Knowledge and the Academy: The Institutional is Political*, Basingstoke/New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Graham, G. (2002) *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*, Exeter, Imprint Academic.

Gregg, M. (2009) Function creep: communication technologies and anticipatory labour in the information workplace. *New Media and Society*.

Hardt, M. and Negri, T. (2000) *Empire*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Jarvis, H. and Pratt, A. (2006) Bringing it all back home: the extensification and 'overflowing' of work: the case of San Francisco's new media households. *Geoforum*, 37, 331–39.

Mason, M.A., Goulden, M. and Wolfinger, N. H. (2006) Babies matter: Pushing the gender equity revolution forward. In Bracken, S., Allen, J. K. and Dean, D. R. (eds) *The Balancing Act: Gendered Perspectives in Faculty Roles and Work Lives*. Sterling, Virginia, Stylus Publishing.

McRobbie, A. (2008) 'Be Creative' Unpublished paper delivered at Barcelona Museum of Contempotart Art. November.

McRobbie, A. (2003) Club to company. *Cultural Studies*, 16, 516–31.

Nakhaie, M. R. (2007) Universalism, ascription and academic rank: Canadian professors 1987–2000. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 44, 361–86.

Negri, T. (1989) *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Power, M. (1994) 'The audit explosion'. London, DEMOS.

Probert, B. (2005) 'I just couldn't fit in': Gender and unequal outcomes in academic careers. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12, 50–72.

Rose, N. (1990) *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self*, London; New York, Routledge.
Ross, A. (2000) The mental labour problem. *Social Text*, 63, 1–32.
—— (2003) *No Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs*, New York, Basic Books.
Sennett, R. (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press.
Soper, K. (1991) Postmodernism, subjectivity and the question of value. *New Left Review*, 186, 120–28.
Strathern, M. (2000) The tyranny of transparency. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26, 309–21.
Thrift, N. (2000) Performing cultures in the new economy. *Annals of the Asssociation of American Geographers*, 90, 674–92.
Ursell, G. (2000) Television production: issues of exploitation, commodification and subjectivity in UK television markets. *Media, Culture and Society*, 22, 805–25.
Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H. and Melody, J. (2001) *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.
Washburn, J. (2003) *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education*, New York, Basic Books.