

Audit Culture and the Politics of Accountability: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: Audit culture is examined comparatively in US academic life and in Catalan universities, medical research institutions and scientific publishing. In the case of Catalan universities, audit is shown to be a political practice as well, serving the centralising interests of the Spanish state at the expense of Catalan home rule. Despite the variation in formal practices and institutional contexts, then, the similarities in both the appearance and effects of these practices are remarkable. As anthropologists working across cultural boundaries, we should be attentive to the many forms coercive surveillance may take.

Over the past twenty years, I have watched the transformation of US academia into yet another neoliberal institution increasingly dominated by new regimes of efficiency, audit, and accountability. I write from the subject position of one repeatedly displaced by the US academic job market, now employed as a medical editor and translator in Barcelona, where I have done fieldwork as an anthropologist periodically for thirty years. Flexibility as a central value of this academic 'enterprise culture' has created a large and growing underclass of temporarily, marginally and partially employed but fully qualified professionals, of whom I was one until recently. Seen from Barcelona, what we might term the 'quality control' aspect of audit culture in Spanish universities is part of a wider contest between the Catalan autonomous government and the Spanish government over the control of higher education and the centralising agenda of the Spanish state.

Many academics, both in the Spanish state and in the US, are positioned in a way that precludes any meaningful

response, much less resistance. Increasingly, US university departments are staffed by faculty members hired on short-term contracts for one year, one semester or one course (for which the pay is abusively low). Many fully qualified professionals with competitive CVs are forced to spend their entire professional lives in this twilight zone where they are never even offered the opportunity to go through the tenure review process (or, in Spain, to compete for a permanent faculty position). However, as a condition for the possibility of continued employment, they are required by those who hire them to demonstrate a consistently high level of scholarly productivity, as are their securely employed colleagues, whose own scholarly activity is regularly monitored and reviewed, and who have, evidently, internalised fully the need for such surveillance even on a playing field which is manifestly not level. Of course, without the stability of uninterrupted access to university libraries, a living wage, and space in which to order one's books, files and thoughts, that kind of intellectual production is immeasurably

harder to achieve ... unless you are the perfect flexible producer, a person who thrives on that kind of instability and insecurity (DiGiacomo 2000).

For most securely and fully employed academics, 'the adjuncts' are a naturally occurring and morally unproblematic social category of professional colleagues available for exploitation (DiGiacomo 1999). The normalisation of a 'flexible' reserve army of academic labour is a direct outcome of neoliberalism and the new managerialism in higher education. The apparent inability of most anthropologists to perceive an ethical problem here is distinctly odd for a profession that claims for itself not only special insight into structural systems of inequality but—judging by several resolutions passed by the AAA (American Anthropological Association) in recent years—a special mandate to expose and condemn them. The AAA Code of Ethics, revised most recently in 1998, is eloquent concerning our professional responsibilities to the human or animal subjects of our research, cultural materials and human remains, our students, our employers and the general public, but it is absolutely silent on our ethical obligations to our own professional colleagues (DiGiacomo 2000).

Faculty unions in the US have not, at least not in my experience, shown any interest in this state of affairs. College and university administrations prefer it, because it saves them money. In the course of participating in an external department evaluation in the US a few years ago, I met a faculty member who was teaching full-time but was continuously rehired on renewable one-semester contracts that allowed the administration not to extend health care benefits to her; she was hardly in a position to complain or make demands. The interest of professional societies in the field of anthropology has been episodic and transitory at best. None of

them even offers reduced membership dues for the unemployed or underemployed. Departments prefer not to talk about it, and focus the discussion on maintaining student enrolments and course coverage instead of examining their own complicity in the production and perpetuation of a system of structural inequality. I have even heard the occasional faculty-meeting joke about 'exploitable' adjuncts: those whose family lives keep them in the local area and available to be called in as institutional need dictates. Adding insult to injury, university administrations make use of the intellectual production of adjunct and part-time faculty—for which they have no right to claim any credit because they have neither remunerated it properly nor created working conditions that facilitate it—to enhance their 'quality' and 'professionalism' in the audit regime. This is as prevalent in Spain as it is in the US (A. Martínez Hernández, pers. comm.).

Perhaps the only argument capable of focusing anthropological attention on this problem is that of self-interest. The emergent models of education and work that have produced the adjunct underclass will also have trickle-up effects. Teaching and scholarship are two of the last bastions of craft production in late capitalism, but professional control over the nature and conditions of this kind of work is being steadily eroded by the corporatisation of the academy. If we fail now to recognise a collective ethical obligation to protect the interests of those who lack the security of tenure, we will find later—and the day may not be far off—that tenure itself will cease to be a protected space in which those fortunate enough to have achieved it are free to do their work. And once tenure has been voided of its most important functions, it will matter very little what the AAA Code of Ethics says about appropriate uses of research materials, our role as mentors or the need to con-

sider the social and political implications of our work in the public realm. Knowledge will be managed increasingly as an institutional asset and will cease to be the intellectual property of those who generate it. When knowledge can be alienated from its producers, the rationalisation of intellectual labour is not far behind. Some departments have begun to discuss the possibility of creating teaching-only faculty positions. In fact, such positions have been in existence for some time in US modern language departments where the language instruction courses are taught by native speakers who are neither expected nor paid to engage in research and are hired on contracts renewable yearly. On some campuses including the University of Massachusetts, the language-skills model has driven out the cultural-studies model in which language acquisition was inseparable from the study of literature, philology and civilisation, and ended graduate degree courses in modern languages. If the link between teaching and research is severed, it is difficult to see what would prevent colleges and universities—especially public institutions faced with shrinking budgets—from outsourcing an increasing proportion of courses to adjunct faculty members paid only for classroom hours. And if these practices become widespread enough, only a handful of privileged departments in top-tier universities will have the stable faculties necessary to sustain graduate courses.

‘The logic of the modern audit system’, according to Shore and Wright (2000), ‘is to produce not “docile bodies” but “self-actualised” auditable individuals’. The audit process is designed to produce insecurity, stress and anxiety, and both students and professors experience them, but unevenly and in different ways. Teaching evaluations have become a centrally important tool in US academia for enforcing

conformity and limiting intellectual freedom on the part of the faculty; in short, a significant element in academic audit culture. In a four-year liberal-arts college where I was temporarily employed, though on a full-time basis so that I was allowed to attend faculty meetings, a tenured senior faculty member put forward a radical proposal to eliminate student evaluations from consideration in faculty reviews. Students, she argued, frequently resist when asked to read difficult, controversial or otherwise challenging material, and many use the course evaluation as an opportunity to castigate the professor for assigning it. If, as a tenured full professor, she was inclined to avoid the problem and assign less demanding and more conventional texts, untenured members of the faculty would be foolish not to do likewise in order to ensure more favourable evaluations and increase their chances of passing their pre-tenure and tenure reviews. Her proposal was prevented by the college administration from coming up for a vote.

US undergraduates—at least in my experience—tend to deal with their anxiety through various forms of self-indulgence and passivity that displace student stress onto the faculty. Graduate students sense that there is something wrong with the system and feel victimised by it, but their resentment is often misdirected at the faculty. Many students appear to accept at its face value the discourse of consumerism and apply it unproblematically as the governing model of and for all experience, including their experience as students. Considering that the cost of an undergraduate degree at a private college is now well over the \$100,000 mark, perhaps it should not surprise us that students often appear to think that they have ‘bought’ their grades, or that they are inclined to use student evaluations as consumer complaint forms. ‘Life is commerce’ is a metaphor they have

learned to live by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) because US society is saturated with it. For quite some time now, physicians have been known in the US as 'health care providers' and patients as 'health care consumers'. This is the language of insurance companies, and it has real and harmful consequences for medical practice and the doctor-patient relationship. It may not be long before professors are renamed 'educational service providers' and students 'educational service consumers'; conceptually, this is already the case.

Knowledge has already long since been downgraded in US colleges and universities to either 'information' (preferably in a form that can be downloaded from the Internet) or easily transferable and marketable 'skills'. The abovementioned trend in modern language departments is an especially egregious case, but it is an extreme example of a general tendency. I am willing to concede that the experience of others may be different, but having taught in some thirteen different colleges and universities in the US over the past twenty years, my experience has been that most US undergraduates have no understanding of the disciplinary basis of knowledge, and do not think it has any relevance for them. This may be a trickle-down effect of a university audit culture in which educational experience has to be reduced to measurable form. The version of audit culture that US undergraduates experience is the tyranny of distribution requirements intended to expose them to a variety of academic disciplines.¹ The US system is quite different from European systems in general, in which students are assumed to have acquired significant general knowledge in secondary school and specialise in the study of a single discipline when they enter the university. By contrast, in order to graduate from college, US students have to demonstrate that they have accumulated sufficient course credits in a range of ever-

expanding categories that has come to include 'diversity', 'civility' and 'general education'. When 'the emphasis is on the "control of control"' at the expense of 'first order operations' (Power 1994, cited in Shore and Wright 2000), the result is what we might call a high standard of standardness, an extremely useful concept I have borrowed from David Mulcahy (pers. comm.). This is, ironically, incompatible with excellence, which is what auditing is supposed to promote.

After this disheartening experience, I decided, when the opportunity arose, to accept a position as a medical editor and translator in Catalonia, the society in which I have done anthropological fieldwork. I work for a privately funded foundation connected to one of Barcelona's teaching hospitals and its associated school of nursing. This is a hybrid environment containing elements of both the world of higher education and the corporate world and subject to the pressures of both. Our work has been audited four times yearly by the foundation's executive council. I considered this degree of self-justification extreme until a friend who works as an editor for a major publishing group specialising in medical journals and textbooks told me that she and her colleagues were required to account for their time on a monthly basis (Montserrat Miralles, pers. comm.).

Audit culture has been well established in the universities of the Spanish state since the nineteenth century, when the system of *oposiciones*, or public competitive examinations, was introduced as a reform measure to correct the abuses of a system that operated on the basis of personal influence and clientelism. Although the *oposiciones* system itself is widely acknowledged to be subject to personalism, manipulation and corruption, this does not prevent it from requiring candidates for teaching positions to submit

reams of teaching plans, bibliographies, research plans, and other documents to justify their candidacy before a committee of assessors who have, at least as often as not, decided beforehand whom they will select to fill the position.

Twelve years ago, I worked in another Catalan institution similarly though not identically situated on the peripheries of the corporate and university worlds: a publicly funded (and therefore politically vulnerable), free-standing but university-affiliated medical research institution. It was there that I first became acquainted with the tyranny of the bibliographic impact factor. In fact, shortly after my arrival in January 1992, the head of my research area devoted an entire departmental seminar to a detailed explication of the concept, of which I had been completely ignorant until then. With the passage of time, I realised that whole research agendas were being driven by their potential for raising the profile of the faculty through sustained publication in high bibliographic impact-factor journals. Every year, a handsomely printed volume (distributed to, among others, the university administration and the civil authorities) lists the achievements of each department and researcher, and because this is a public document it is easy to compare not only your department's performance with that of others, but your own personal production with that of your colleagues. It is as if the annual faculty reports of US universities were made available for general inspection. The result, and probably the intention, at least at this research institute, was heightened competitiveness which occasionally took absurd forms: individuals calculating their own personal bibliographic impact factor, for instance (impossible, since the unit of analysis is the journal, not the individual author).

In the life sciences, the journals with the highest bibliographic impact factors are

those published in English, and this is no doubt true in most other fields as well, anthropology included. This places non-Anglophone anthropologists at a significant disadvantage. Scientific English, at least, is more accessible; its vocabulary, syntax and literary conventions are limited, and the structure of scientific articles is unvarying. But in anthropology, the analysis depends on the author's ability to convey shades of meaning, and this automatically places anthropologists in the non-English-speaking world at a significant disadvantage in the high-stakes political economy of publication and professional advancement. As a Catalan colleague and fellow medical anthropologist put it, 'juggling efforts in basic English' permit him and other European anthropologists an 'anecdotal presence' at 'the margin of the margin' of 'English-speaking space' (Comelles 2002: 10). The important transactions in the global marketplace of ideas take place in English, and as a result the theoretical and methodological interests of Anglophone anthropology come to be treated as the core scientific questions of the discipline, while European contributions to the literature, even in high-quality English translation, are often seen as local, anecdotal or even bizarre. There are significant institutionalised barriers to real globalisation even within a discipline based on the crossing of cultural boundaries.

Here in Catalonia, the drive for commensurability and standardisation currently being played out in universities serves political ends that go far beyond institutions of higher education. Catalonia is one of seventeen autonomous communities constituting the Spanish state. This system of political decentralisation (it is not a federal system) was put in place as part of the transition to democracy following the death of General Franco and his regime in 1975. Article 15 of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, approved by the Spanish par-

liament (the Cortes) and by referendum in Catalonia in 1979, gives the Catalan government full powers of self-regulation in matters of education, and Article 27 of the democratic Spanish Constitution of 1978 specifically does away with centralised control of Spanish universities.

However, interference in recent years by the Spanish central government (controlled by the right from 1996 to 2004) in Catalan primary and secondary school curricula concerning (a) the teaching of history, (b) the use of the Catalan language as the vehicle of instruction and the number of hours per week devoted to language instruction in Spanish, and (c) the inclusion of religious instruction, paved the way for similar Spanish government interference in Catalan university life in the form of a new law providing for uniform state regulation of all universities. On 19 February 2003, the Catalan Parliament passed a law establishing the mission of the university in Catalan society and regulating the Catalan university system as a whole in terms of faculty recruitment, tenure and promotion, the relationship between teaching and research, and students' rights and responsibilities as members of a university community. Article 137 of this law provides for the creation of a Catalan agency charged with maintaining quality in higher education (*Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya*) whose task would be evaluation, accreditation and certification of the faculty (Martí i Torres 2003).

The Spanish government led by former president José María Aznar appealed this law to the Constitutional Court, as it also did with other pieces of legislation passed by the Catalan Parliament operationalising its powers of self-government; no exceptions come readily to mind. In June 2003 the Constitutional Court agreed to take up the matter and suspended, pending its final decision, five articles of the new uni-

versity law, four of which regulate faculty-hiring categories, requirements and practices. The fifth, article 148.2, specifies that faculty evaluations by other agencies may be taken into consideration in judging a faculty member's performance. The central government's argument here was that faculty reviews carried out by its own agency, ANECA (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación*) are of an obligatory nature and must be part of any evaluative process. The Constitutional Court was expected to take at least six months to arrive at a ruling, and in the meantime, uncertainty about the outcome led to the suspension of some of the activities of the Catalan evaluative agency, though not all of them. An external academic review of the social anthropology course at the University of Barcelona was postponed repeatedly and finally abandoned (Oriol Pi-Sunyer, pers. comm.). However, a colleague of mine who teaches at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, where she also serves as assistant dean, spent weeks wrestling with the thirty-five categories in which the Catalan government requires universities to provide quantitative evidence of 'improvement' in the quality of higher education (Melissa Moyer, pers. comm.).

I do not know the final decision of the Constitutional Court in this matter. What emerges clearly, however, is that in Catalonia the meaning of 'coercive commensurability' goes far beyond the boundaries of academic standardisation. The discourse on quality in higher education serves an attempt at political recentralisation. In an attempt to bypass the Catalan Statute of Autonomy and even the Spanish Constitution, coercion was applied in order to bring Catalan universities forcibly under the evaluative gaze of the Spanish state: a tactical move in a uniformising strategy designed to undermine the legal basis of Catalan self-government. Or, in terms

Catalan observers have used, a political involution, a *de facto* restoration of the centralised state by dismantling, piece by piece, the autonomous community structure of democratic Spain.

What emerges from this brief comparative tour of different systems of auditing in two societies is the underlying similarity in practice and effect despite variation in formal structures. They all result in processes of marginalisation. In US universities, a growing reserve army of academic labour has to achieve high scores in audit systems in order to maintain even its precarious hold on employment. It is increasingly difficult to move from this marginal position and to gain access to the tenure-track appointments for which these performance indicators were initially intended. The undercurrent of student stress and anxiety on US university campuses is traceable in part to the audit systems to which students are subjected in the name of both intellectual breadth and respect for diversity as a social value, even as the transmission of measurable and marketable skills displaces the transmission of knowledge as the goal of higher education. Catalan scholars find their intellectual production marginalised in a globalising audit system that privileges certain intellectual styles, publication venues and the English language over others. Audit procedures in Catalan universities have themselves become the site of a political struggle over the Spanish government's attempt to recentralise power and marginalise the Catalan autonomous government. As anthropologists, whether working 'at home' or across cultural boundaries, we should be alert to the many forms auditing may take, and to the resulting struggles over their marginalising and controlling effects.

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Note

1. Distribution requirements are a universal feature of undergraduate education in the United States. Students are required to take a variety of courses representing not only the various disciplines in both the arts and the sciences, but also, increasingly, a variety of 'values' requirements consisting of courses that emphasize the importance of cultural diversity and tolerance for difference of all kinds (gender, linguistic, racial, etc.) as an attempt to engender greater civility in campus life.

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