

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Timidity and the 'Radical' Academic Mind: A Response to the SIGJ2 Writing Collective

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Recently the SIGJ2 Writing Collective (hereafter 'the Collective') published an essay entitled ['What can we do? The challenge of being new academics in neoliberal universities'](#) in *Antipode* describing the plight of new academics as well as articulating actions that they plan to take to reform the academy. Unfortunately, this piece evinces more about these new academics' socialization to the neoliberal status quo and their fear of rocking the boat than it does a "collective imagining of an alternative future" (p. 1055) for the academy.

My disagreement with the Collective's essay is not with their intentions. I feel that the reforms they propose are positive and would certainly not aid neoliberalism's infestation of the university. What I do take issue with is that the Collective labels these reforms as "radical". For instance, the group states that "[t]here are several radical (and everyday) actions we can take..." to "reduce individualized competition" (p. 1056). To be clear, I am not picking on the group over semantics. I am using their essay to demonstrate how the current academic environment has moved so far to the right that it fosters an atmosphere of precarity that tempers the actions and thoughts of aspiring radical academics. This, in turn, greatly skews the debate over university reform towards the corporatist right by limiting what is considered acceptable radical left thought. To illustrate my point I will examine what the SIGJ2 contends are radical actions

and propose some alternate radical actions that I feel would actually strike at the roots of neoliberalism in the academy.

The Collective's first proposed radical action is "the promotion and encouragement of collective ways to publish" (p. 1056) in addition to "publish[ing] our papers freely online as part of writing collectives rather than in profit-driven journals" (p. 1057). I applaud the notion of collective, open access publication but I would hardly call this practice a radical action. While challenging the regressive inertia of their respective departments may seem radical to a group of 'new academics' such as the Collective, their proposal presents only a modest reform.

First, collectively producing and sharing knowledge is not directly confronting the structure of the neoliberal academy. There are many mainstream efforts to privilege this type of collective endeavor most notably the [Berlin Declaration](#) on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities and the various European Union sanctioned [Virtual Research Communities](#) as well as those mentioned in the Collective's paper. Producing and sharing collective knowledge is a noble endeavor and may, no doubt, "have dramatic implications for existing institutional performance criteria" (p. 1057) however it doesn't do much to confront the neoliberal restructuring that has drastically altered the academy. The Collective's preoccupation with institutional performance criteria is further evidence of how the neoliberal discourse limits the group's scope of proposed acceptable actions. How can we fight against the push to corporatize the academy when we leave intact the modes of external control? The Collective's desire for a system of scholarly review that requires collegiality and transparency rather than the farcical, single, double, and even more ludicrously triple blind peer review process is laudable. However, a radical action, not tempered by our drastic rightward slide, might be to champion an open peer-review process like [Shakespeare Quarterly](#) (see [here](#) also) that allows critiques of manuscripts to be made in the light of day rather than in quasi-anonymity where all sorts of biases come into play. Technology, such as Wiki, exists to make the peer-review process more transparent and would certainly challenge the modes of prior censorship that often inhibit critical and radical thought from entering mainstream journals.

Unfortunately we have moved so far toward a market fundamentalism in academia so quickly that practices that seemed status quo or moderately progressive only ten years ago, like sharing information among colleagues, now appear radical to those just starting their careers in academia. Accompany this with the pervasive corporate autocratic belief that one does not criticize anyone in authority and a call to channel this neoliberal tide seems downright radical.

The Collective's second proposed action does have a radical tinge to it. Their recommendation for "challeng[ing] or chang[ing] our institutional environments or our relationships with one another" (p. 1056) directly confronts the tyranny of 'standardization' as a mechanism for deteriorating academic freedom. They state:

"As scholars we assess each other's work, each other's grant applications, and each other's teaching practice. It would therefore seem a simple task to ignore or subvert the question of 'impact' or 'quality' when we come to assessing those same grant applications, journal submissions, teaching reports...Next time, just say 'excellent impact statement' in referee reports..." (p. 1057).

Their willingness to use negative power (what I like to think of as passive resistance) to transgress the oppressive structures of the academy is certainly the type of action that could effect positive change in the university structure. The subversion of these systems of control through a modified form of grade inflation can be an effective technique for fighting neoliberalism in the academy. I applaud this transgressive action and wish they would use this type of resistance in other areas of academic life.

Their third proposed action, moving beyond "the walls or the tower (or whatever structural metaphor is appropriate)" (p.1057) by engaging in community focused research and activism, is a great idea especially with the social justice activism that members of the Collective are already engaged in. However, this type of outreach and activism is already being undertaken by thousands of academics and, though doubtlessly of great benefit to communities outside the ivy covered walls of the university, have caused very little positive reforms within the academy. This type of outreach is currently encouraged by many university administrators, the corporate

world, and the government (as long as they don't have to pay for it) because it is good public relations for the university and it legitimizes their more odious practices like conducting a preponderance of corporate-friendly research. Social justice activism undertaken by academics outside the academy is akin to having a petroleum corporation acknowledge environmental degradation: it may make it seem more progressive but it doesn't positively alter the structure of the institution. Think of it like greenwashing for the Corporate University. In addition, this focus on activism outside the university is, and has been, instrumental in dissipating revolutionary energy by encouraging radical researchers to look elsewhere to effect positive change and not turn their radical gaze at oppression and marginalization happening in academy. Addressing oppression and marginalization in the university leads me to the Collective's forth proposed action.

The fourth action point was related to the members of SIGJ2's role in the classroom. Actually the members of the Collective didn't have a fourth action point because they completely ignored their most influential point of intervention for radically changing the university; students. Sadly, the Collective's silence regarding students' role in the reformation of the academy mimics the same disregard for students as many university administrators and some senior faculty. If it is not the intent of this well-meaning group of new academics to reproduce the same hierarchical power relations that impede egalitarian reform within the academy than why not focus as much attention on building solidarity with students as changing the bureaucratic and research dissemination processes? Contrary to the beliefs of our more cynical colleagues, students want to learn and many are just as interested in reforming the academy as the members of the Collective. From Quebec, to Chile, to the UK students are taking to the streets to challenge the oppressive neoliberal deformities of the academy. Students shouldn't be ignored, infantilized, or treated as an encumbrance. They should be acknowledged as equal partners and powerful allies in dismantling neoliberalism in the university.

Another way the Collective could foster "collective action in order to reduce individualized competition" (p. 1056), as the Collective astutely suggests, would be to come together on equal ground with students and define common goals through egalitarian dialogue. Many of these students are eager to shake free of the paternalistic schooling structure that they have endured

since kindergarten. However the modern neoliberal university structure perpetuates the same erroneous model of learning. In fact, why not engage in solidarity with another natural ally in the struggle the corporatized university; the growing underclass of contract academic faculty. I know they would appreciate the help.

I appreciate that these new academic feel they occupy an 'insecure' space in their departments but I posit that it is this feeling of insecurity that causes them to be insecure. The members of the Collective appear to not want to rock the boat too much for fear of being punished by their colleagues. And by constantly defining their position as 'precarious' they fail to see the privileged role they have to institute real radical changes in the academy (see p.1055). As many radical academics have surely witnessed, tenure doesn't make a professor more likely to speak out; it just makes them think that they have more to lose if they do. We must remember that if we keep letting our fear redefine radical as what is practical then we will continue to shift the discourse of academic reform to the right; the same direction it has been heading for the last 30+ years.

This is not a time to pussyfoot around. If we continue to acquiesce to the perceived demands of many senior academics, professional administrators, and political and economic elites external to the university in a vain effort to preserve our careers, the job we are trying to preserve will keep getting more and more taxing to the point that it won't be worth shit. But by then it might be too late to change anything. To the SIGJ2 Writing Collective I implore you, and all other sympathetic academics who feel the quickening of neoliberalism's pace in transforming the university into a sweatshop, to reflect on your everyday practices that reify neoliberalism in the university. Then transcend your fears, and take bolder steps to make real radical reforms in the academy. Because if we don't I am afraid the idea of the university as a space for creative, emancipatory, and sometimes radical thought will slide down the memory hole.