



# Neo-Liberal University in Permanent State of Exception!

written by Julie Billaud  
September, 2014



A short while ago we celebrated Allegra's 1st birthday by re-visiting the [‘TOP 10’](#) posts of our first year. After this we have continued working hard behind the scenes to set everything up for Allegra's next phases, namely to finalise the smooth operations of our 'Production Line' consisting of our wonderful editorial team (there is still room for those who want to join - remember our [OPEN CALL!](#)). As we further have already demonstrated over the past few weeks with the theme of [#Sustainability](#) curated by [Fiona Murpy](#), and the week on the [#AfghanElections](#) overseen by Allegra's moderator [Julie Billaud](#), the issues that Allegra addresses will in the future remain broad - and in part unpredictable also to us, Allegra's hosts. This will be both because of our continually expanding editorial team, and because of the increasing number of visitors who will oversee thematic weeks.

Yet, in the spirit of remaining true to our '[Slow Food Manifesto](#)', on occasion we



continue to slow things down by revisiting '[Jewels of Allie's Archives](#)' - our constantly growing treasure trove. This week we do so by revisiting posts and developments that overshadow one of the most severe motivations to launch Allegra in the first place: **ongoing university reforms which undermine the vitality of our entire profession.**

To summarise just a few 'indicators' of these developments, things got off on a gloomy note from the very start with the news in Spring 2013 - when planning for Allegra was in full swing - that [Marshall Sahlins](#) had in an extraordinary act resigned from the US National Academy of Sciences to protest the Academy's policies support of research designed to improve the mission-efficiency of the U.S. military. [Petitions](#) pleading the amendment of these policies quickly spread, gaining vast support, but to our knowledge, with no impact.

Then we received news that the Berlin Senate had decided to cut the budget for the Forum Transregionale Studien from 2014 onwards, which in concrete meant the annihilation of the Rechtskulturen program run in collaboration with Humboldt University and launched with big fanfares a few years earlier. Again, [petitions](#) were quickly drawn up and their signatories included world-renown scholars all testifying to the unique scholarly potential and importance of the program - again, to no avail. The program has since been quietly shut down with only the bitter memory of the promises for new kind of scholarly horizons left behind.

This summer things have hardly improved, if one treats the [case of Steven Salaita](#) as a benchmark: as most are aware by now, the University of Illinois reversed their decision to hire him on the basis of his 'inflammatory' [tweets criticising Israel's actions in Gaza](#). Although the backlash of this decision has been and remains enormous, nothing is certain in its final outcome which is likely a long way from being reached.



# New Management Culture with Audit Obsessions

Of course these details are symptomatic of much deeper developments which find one expression in our collective obsession for continually greater productivity – and what better way to ‘grade’ all this than by immersing ourselves in the ‘audit culture’ that has swept over the academia over the past few decades as the disciplinary techniques of the New Management Culture have effectively entered our universities. Some universities, in [Germany](#), in [France](#) and in [the UK](#) desperately try to resist, but we find ourselves asking: for how long?

Why is it that so many of us are so complicit and accept to submitting to Research Assessment Exercises and Teaching Quality Audits when these represent our work so poorly? Is it, as [Marilyn Strathern](#) suggests, that [the power of transparency](#) is so pervasive that resistance becomes automatically suspicious?

The effects of these disciplinary techniques are multiple : Not only do they shape specific [academic subjectivities](#), but they force academics to present themselves in certain ways. Thus this liberal obsession with ‘impact’ oriented/applied research also means that [critical traditions are in grave danger](#). If one cannot deny the need for research to be relevant, impact criteria often rely on quantifiable data instead of qualitative ones.

In his post titled ‘Universities in a State of Exception’ opening our thematic week on University Crisis [Dimitris Dalakoglou](#) discusses these issues and many more, poignantly observing:

*“When we all are too busy reproducing imagined categories and separations with the rest of the controlled, our power to react against the sovereign of control is weakened significantly.”*



## Universities & the Dawn of the New Managerial Class

However as Dalakoglou also observes, of course audit cultures and new management techniques need to be examined in a far broader context to grasp both their complexity and full danger. Here we naturally refer to the subjection of scholarly work to the interest of capitalist pursuit. This issue has been amply discussed.

For example, as Leighton [Christiansen explains in a recent article of the Socialist Worker](#): “ Since the 1970s, colleges and universities have become (...) corporatized “knowledge factories,” adopting big-business employment and organization models; shifting funding out of classrooms; and pouring money into administrators’ salaries and corporate profit margins. These practices include eliminating full-time jobs, contracting jobs out to the private sector, cutting benefits-and hiring more part-time instructors. »

Indeed, one undoubted consequence that we have seen of this crisis is the emergence of the ‘academic fat cat’, aka the vice chancellor. Evidence of this is staggering. For example, at Sussex University [Vice-Chancellor Michael Farthing is now paid £280,000 \(including pensions contributions\), as compared to £178,000 in 2007](#) (that’ll be *a 57% increase* then). This comes after Farthing made a strategic plan ironically entitled [‘Making the future’](#), which led to massive cuts and redundancies. Farthing has effectively disbanded the renowned Linguistics Department, shut down the Center for Community Engagement (which offered short courses for those in employment or unable to attend university) and cut fundings for the others. Farthing’s decision to outsource services on campus has provoked [widespread civil disobedience by students](#).

We continue our thematic week by giving the floor – quite literally – to [David](#)



[Graeber and the video](#) that we originally posted of his speech in early February, 2014, of his talk at the [Symposium Anthropological Knots](#) arranged in Helsinki in January 15, 2014; a timely video as we anticipate the arrival of the special forthcoming issue of [HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory](#) on the event.

## **‘Dear Older Generation’**

After this we switch to a different mood in an attempt to capture the ‘feeling’ of this crises from the perspectives of those – or rather, us – who are struggling to ‘make it’ in the current, continually deteriorating professional situation. Increasingly, it is academics everywhere who seem to have become the « new precariat », while managers reap their awards. Last fall the symbol of these losing battles became the tragic fate of [Margaret Mary Vjotko](#), a 25-year adjunct professor who died destitute at the age of 83 and who appeared to have become – at least momentarily – the symbol of devastating working conditions for academics in temporary positions.

An additional outcome of all this – and one of the most regrettable developments – is the stress and atmosphere of rivalry instead of collegial solidarity which increasingly inhabits our professional sphere. We share a poem authored by Allegra’s moderator [Miia Halme-Tuomisaari](#) dedicated to the fate of Vjotko on the plight to ‘make it’ in these dire professional circumstances – some will succeed, others who will die in destitute, both figuratively and concretely.

## **To the University of Utopia!**

Where does all this lead us – in sentiments of despair? NEVER! For despite of Allegra being unfalteringly ‘dead serious’ about the issues that it addresses, it remains also ‘tongue in cheek’. And humour being the best medicine & also the



most effective way of resistance, we conclude our thematic week on University Crises with a beacon of light for online resistance: Université de Muri.

What Université de Muri really is, we will explain in further detail on Friday. Let us merely say for now that it is a the love child of inspiration meeting utopian thinking – still very much a sketch – but a creation backed up by both firm and unfaltering spirits.

Université de Muri is also our bow to the recent initiatives that we have seen to reclaim back the space of intellectual freedom that is currently under peril. These initiative include spontaneous lectures delivered by [Slovej Zizek](#), [Judith Butler](#), [Andrew Ross](#), [Joseph Stiglitz](#) and many others in public spaces as a part of the Occupy movement. These lectures remind us of the urgency to collectively reclaim our space – a space whose content should not be dictated by benchmarks and indicators, but rather by the imagination that is necessary in order ‘to think our times by thinking against our time’ (as Wendy Brown phrases it).

In contrast with the open lectures organised by French intellectuals in La Sorbonne during the May 68 revolt, the open air lectures of the Occupy movement signify that the main space for us to reclaim is a ‘state of mind’ before being a physical space. Simultaneously the open-air lecture format is also a powerful illustration of the extent to which we have been dispossessed. While our governments have poured public money to save the banks, we have been made homeless and our universities have become virtual, [nomadic](#), [utopian](#).







This fact is perhaps best captured by the [University for Strategic Optimism](#), an initiative launched by students at Goldsmith University (London) as the Occupy movement found a momentum in the British academia. This imaginary university presents itself in the following terms on its [website](#):

*Our basic public services, we are told, are simply too expensive. They must be thrown under the wheels of the megalithic debt that bears down upon us. They must be privatised, corporatised and commodified (...) The UfSO offers an emphatic No! to this description of our current situation, and sees instead a magnificent opportunity, a multiplication of possibilities, the opening of a space in which we might think about, and bring about, a fairer and and more fulfilling society for all. In short: Many good reasons for strategic optimism!*

The [UfSO inaugural lecture](#) was held by Dr. Etienne Lantier (a pseudonym?) at Lloyds TBS, Borough High Street London on November 24th 2010. Other impromptu lectures were organised in [TESCO supermarkets](#), and [in front of the Ministry of Business and Innovation](#), to alert the public that the University is indeed, for sale...and may well disappear altogether, as the recent [shut down of the University of Athens](#) sadly seems to announce.

Thus we conclude this week by sharing yet another idea for resistance - one that perhaps will start flourishing as the consequence of collective inspiration, or one that is destined to remain obscure. Whatever its future, the Université de Muri testifies one thing: as long as there is humour in resistance, even if neoliberal governance may continue its dishonourable efforts to discipline the minds and bodies of the workers of its 'knowledge factory', the free spirit of intellectual pursuits remains very much alive!