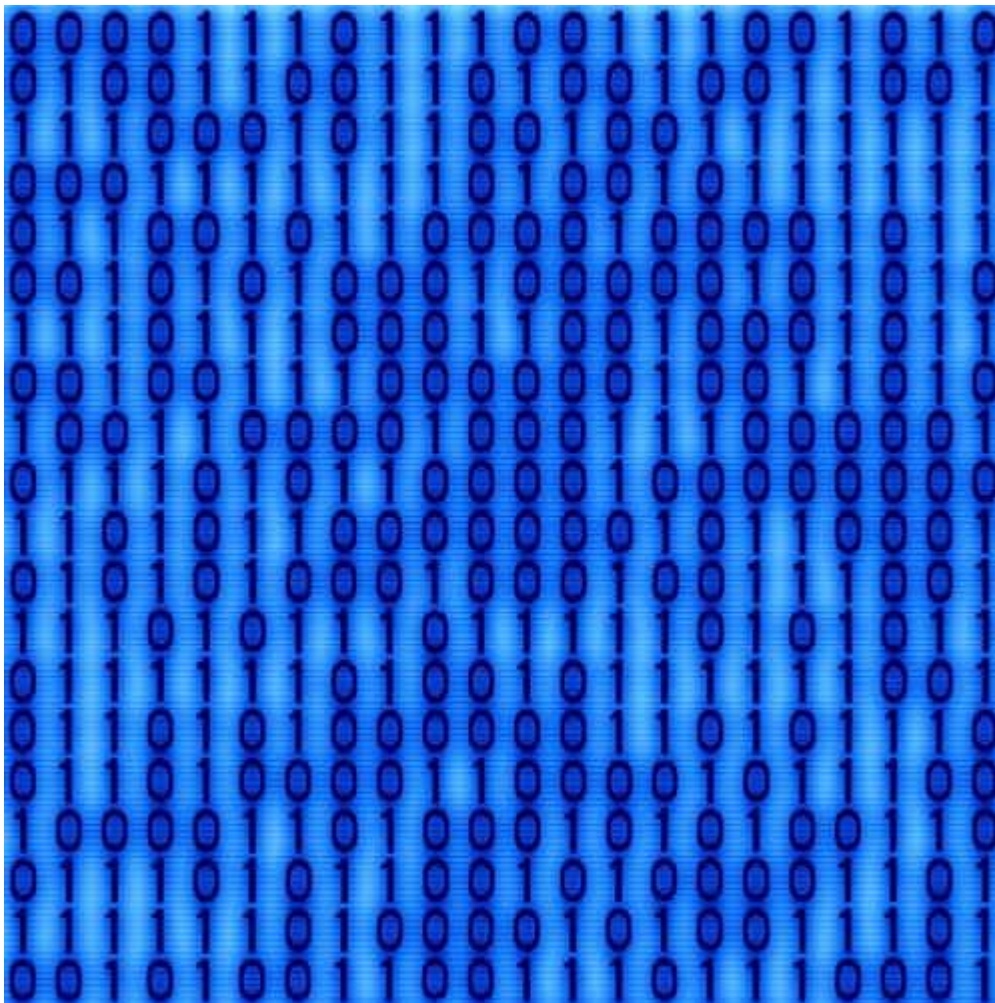




# Neoliberalism as Liberation in Russian Data Science

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It should not be too controversial to say that the Russian university system is somewhat dilapidated. Certainly, this was the opinion of many of the computer science and mathematics faculty members I met during my fieldwork with Russian data scientists. They complained about corruption, outdated methods, lack of equipment, crumbling facilities: the whole nine postsocialist yards. Of course, they were also quick to point out the truly staggering contributions to mathematics and theoretical physics made by their professional ancestors despite



the current state of intellectual disrepair. Rather than yearning for a position abroad, however, or indulging a nostalgia for better days, most of the scientists I worked with were eager to meet the demands of the day with practical, concrete efforts to reform their institutional environment. These knowledge workers self-consciously styled themselves as part of a revolutionary vanguard, keen to deploy management techniques drawn from the “Western” repertoire to establish truly rational governance of the university and their own selves.

Though one could find clusters of technocratic agitators at most of the universities I visited, the Higher School of Education (where I ended up spending most of my time during fieldwork) was the only place I found in which they seemed to be in positions of both scholarly and administrative power. The Higher School is an elite Moscow institution founded in 1992, putatively after the model of the Western research university. My research there focused on a new department of computer science, founded with substantial logistical support from [Yandex](#), a web infrastructure firm that my informants frequently called, not without humor, “sort of a Russian google.” This department aspired to be, perhaps above all, an oasis of “rationalized governance,” free from the suffocating intellectual conformity (which my informants sometimes ironically called *partinost'*) and the corrupting influence of patronage networks (*blat*) that its members universally felt dominated much of the Russian educational system.

*One crucial component of this rationalization was the wholesale and enthusiastic adoption of audit culture (Strathern 2000) and the deployment of neoliberal techniques of self-management at both the personal and institutional level (Michael, Marshall, and Fitzsimons 2000).*

The implementation of such techniques is clearly widespread. Mining the veins of inquiry into the impact of neoliberal audit culture on Western higher education opened by Shore and Wright (1999), ethnographers of higher education have found its global reach surprisingly ubiquitous (e.g. contributors to Canaan and Shumar 2008). In these narratives, the quantification of research and teaching



output, the expansion of administrative oversight, the making contingent of labour, and the bureaucratization of personal relationships combine to form a system of flexible control over a newly precarious professoriate, positioned as in service to students reimagined as customers. Yet by and large these have been tragic tales in which the free exercise of creativity, the principled education of young scholars, and the passionate commitment to a life of the mind are under assault by the quantified, the bureaucratic, the mundane, the corporate. My informants, by contrast, are willing to accept the outrages of managerial control to eke out a place for themselves at the scientific table. Indeed they are committed scientists who *chose* to work in the university precisely because of their belief in what they feel to be its unique promise: the ability to freely and honestly pursue science as a vocation (Weber 1946).



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This does not mean, however, that they were any great innovators of administrative technique. Rather than surprising hybrids or interesting mutations, most of the techniques they used to assemble their local audit culture and govern their work practices were rather straightforwardly drawn from the neoliberal repertoire. More than one of my interviewees, for example, recommended that I read Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow* to understand how it felt to be on a productive "programming jag." One had his students read *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* during their first year of dissertation work. Another religiously followed the Pomodoro technique. This repertoire also informed their institutional engagement: all of them were universally proud that their compensation was directly tied to their number of publications in vetted, english-language journals, and that student evaluations were quantitative and tied directly to their



advancement. Indeed, many of them brought their data-scientific expertise to bear in developing metrics to measure their own performance. They were also proud to be working in a department founded upon academic-industrial collaboration. In part, this was mercenary: my informants were mostly data scientists, hungry for real world data that they could use in their research. More profoundly, however, ties to industry were viewed as a critical tool for keeping the educational sector “honest”; The Higher School invited members from Yandex to sit on the academic council of their new department not primarily to help direct the research agenda, but to provide input on the curriculum, and ensure that the department continued to teach its students “only useful and modern techniques,” rather than allowing its professors to continue to “read the same old lectures from the 1990s.” For my informants, this was a crucial, “cultural” shift away from a commitment to “lazy tradition,” in a discipline where traditionalism firmly excluded one from full participation in either industrial or academic activity at the global level.

It is easy for jaded scholars of the corporate university to wring their hands or to smirk about the willing uptake of such pernicious neoliberal technologies of control and organization. As a participant in anthropological conversations about audit culture and the neoliberal university myself, my initial reaction was to fret about the potential long-term consequences of such projects. When I pushed back against my friends’ more enthusiastic endorsements of audit culture, though, they bristled. One told me that I just didn’t understand how stifling it was to work under professors whose “knowledge stopped in the 90s,” and lose out on advancement to colleagues whose supposedly peer-reviewed publications were in fact “arranged” by those same “tea drinkers.” As another put it, “it’s hard to worry about corrupting science when the university is already corrupt.” Far from being in service to a scheme of control put in place by entrenched managerial elites, neoliberal techniques here form part of an oppositional, reformist project being launched by committed scholars and teachers, trying to clear space to get on with the business of teaching and scholarship.

*In other words, the demand for clarification, quantification, rationalization, and*



*industrialization of the university field is a calculated political move being made by the dominated fraction of the class dominating the academic establishment (Bourdieu 1990).*

Graduate students, docents, and young professors are trying to imagine hopeful scientific futures for themselves outside of the stuffy, “tea-drinking” world of the entrenched and nostalgic academic elite. Certainly, members of dominated class fractions often are required to act more strategically than their dominant colleagues in navigating the academic field (Peacock 2016). However, this explanation does not fully exhaust the situation in Russian computer science, where these culturally and bureaucratically subordinated workers are not especially “precarious” in the sense that term has come to carry in commentary on higher education. For one thing, graduate students are virtually guaranteed employment at their university upon finishing their degree (my friends were universally horrified to find out this was not the case at my own university). For another, while university wages are abysmally low, if my informants were to fall out of academia, they would almost universally fall *up*, into readily-available and extremely high-paying data scientist jobs in either local or European industry. Instead, they choose to stay and participate in academia and in reforming the university.

Beyond being a strategic response to domination, then, the active participation in neoliberalizing their work practices and institutions appears inextricable from their commitment to science as a vocation. Certainly, some left for business simply because they felt it was the only place to “get good science done in Russia today” (echoing the feelings of the similarly passionate corporate scientists described by Rabinow [1996]). Most, however, were committed to the university as both a place of work and an object of reform. For these workers,

*neoliberal techniques and audit culture were neither foisted upon them, nor uncritically taken up, but rather quite consciously viewed as tools to break out of the mundane professional corruption and the suffocating intellectual*



*conservatism they see all around them.*

Unlike the professors from the faculties of Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* (1984), my informants' moves are not forced by the ideological and institutional dominance of their local superordinates. Neither are they engaging in some sort of cargo cult neoliberalism: they know that all of the quantification and rationalization in the world do not guarantee scientific virtue. Rather, they hope, and their experience has led them to believe, that such techniques can clear the space for the free exercise of their vocation.

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