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Exploring the Neoliberal Transformation of European Universities

An Anthropological Roller-coaster Journey

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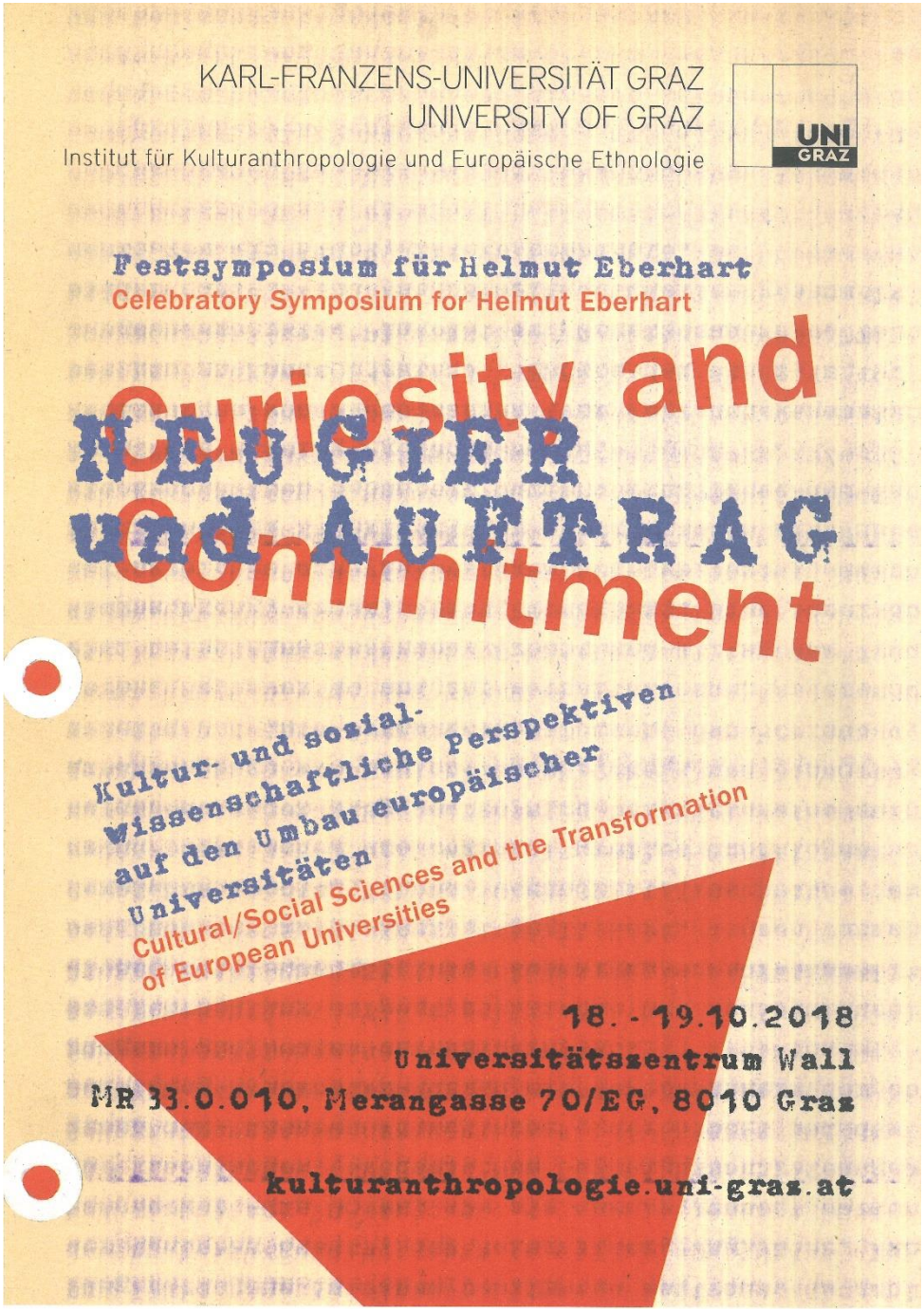

Figure 1: Invitation flyer

'NEUGIER UND AUFTRAG' was the message in faded typescript on the invitation flyers (Figure 1) announcing our official symposium for Helmut Eberhart, our colleague and the long-standing Dean of Studies of the Faculty of Humanities upon his retirement in the autumn of 2018. The background had been designed to resemble a working paper from the 1970s or 80s that had been run through the duplicator, right down to the white reinforcement washers. Furthermore, as one could gather from the German announcement typed in blue, we claimed to address 'political transformations within universities and their influence on academic everyday spaces, working strategies and research motives from the 1970s to the present day' and promised 'an exploration into the heterogeneous university landscape of Europe with insights into local as well as superregional challenges in the context of "Maastricht", "Bologna" and the discussions about the neoliberalisation of European universities.' The message that was proclaimed here so ponderously and in shaky lettering was contrasted in red, edgily and without a hint of antiquatedness, by the English translation with its slogan 'Curiosity and Commitment' – which could certainly have derived from neoliberal newspeak.

This ambiguous impression was intentional, although in the meantime the social sciences research into the governing mentality in German-speaking academia had also accepted the '[c]riticism of the cannibalistic activities of the "academic cannibalism"'[1] (Hark and Hofbauer 2018b: 19) as part of university politics. Only recently the volumes *Ambivalenzraum Universität* (Lind and Pany 2016) and *Vermessene Räume, gespannte Beziehungen* (cf. Hark and Hofbauer 2018a) had opened up long-overdue discussions in the German-speaking region that were critical of domination and feminist in tone in their aims for change in the university of today. They expressed an enlightened, humanistic ethos on the one hand, but on the other, the expertise of those subjects which qua social-sciences methodology are close to quantifying and measuring, 'the penetration of ever more areas of life with data- and indicator-based forms of assessment and control' (ibid., 10). By contrast, in English-speaking science, the neoliberal reconstruction of the university, especially for scholars in the departments of cultural and social anthropology, has long since passed the pain threshold and led to a lively ethnographical reflection and political articulation of their own position (cf. Sparkes 2007; Canaan and Shumar 2008; Gill 2010; Shore et al. 2011; Shore and Wright 2015). A high point with far-reaching effects here was the angry campaign of the social anthropologist Tim Ingold demanding to 'Reclaim the University of Aberdeen':

1 All translations of quotes from German to English in this introduction are by Jane Michael.

> *We have watched in anger and dismay as fundamental principles of trust, professionalism and freedom of expression on which academic life depends have been crushed under an avalanche of mindless bullet points, dehumanising and dysfunctional IT systems, arbitrary directives and sham consultations (Ingold 2016a).*

Ingold's statements were disseminated via blogs, Facebook pages and guest postings, which stated nothing less than the end of an enlightened humanism: 'Like it or not, however, the Enlightenment programme has more or less collapsed, along with the powers that sustained it' (Ingold 2016b). The aim of the movement was the formulation of a manifesto as a model for the development of a fundamental reform programme (cf. RoU 2016); it came to a temporary end following its rejection by the Senate of the University of Aberdeen (cf. RoU 2018). Paragraph 19 of the manifesto invokes an approach to research driven by curiosity against the regulatives of the 'Audit Culture':

> *Under the current framework of evaluation, the meaning of research has been corrupted beyond recognition. It has become a game, in which universities and their academic personnel are players. [...] In our university, however, research will be driven neither by market demand nor by the expectation of novelty. It will be driven by curiosity – by the burning desire to find things out (RoU 2018, 5).*

These are all portentous words. At first sight they seem somewhat out of place in the Austrian university system which (as of 2018) is comparatively well provided-for by the welfare state and the collective agreement, in whose deliberate bureaucratic acts of confusion the spirit of the Habsburg monarchy still seems to have a hand. In similar fashion, our Institute in Graz still radiates the leisurely atmosphere of the old university, occupying as it does high-ceilinged rooms across two floors of a nineteenth-century building on the edge of the university campus, with spacious rooms for teaching and studying, including a reference library and reading room specialising in ethnology and cultural analysis[2]. However, a dual approach is expressed here even in the name it bore from 1999 until 2017, *Institut für Volkskunde und Kulturanthropologie* (Department of Folklore Studies and Cultural Anthropology). Here, it is first and foremost the name of Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch that is associated with the progressive approach of a socio-critical cultural anthropology

2 With these tentative English denominations, we try to capture the Germanophone Post-*Volkskunde* disciplines. *Volkskunde*, equalling folklore studies, refers to the precursing discipline of European ethnology (also renamed, amongst other labels, as *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft* – Empirical Cultural Analysis – or *Kulturanthropologie – cultural anthropology*) in German-speaking countries. The renaming of previous departments and institutions of Volkskunde, from 1971 to the present, is accompanied by lively discussions of disciplinary self-reflection between anti-traditionalist critique and the need for modernisation in the specific circumstances of recent German and Austrian history.

of intervention. Following in the footsteps of Pierre Bourdieu, from the 1980s she gave the Graz Institute a distinguished profile as a scientific centre for a versatile and ethno-psychoanalytically sensitive cultural analysis of neo-liberalism (cf. Katschnig-Fasch and Malli 2003). By way of contrast, Helmut Eberhart, a contemporary of Katschnig-Fasch at the same Institute for more than forty years, also represented the balancing act between a cultural analysis based on arguments from sociology and ethnology and a liberal-minded *Volkskunde*. He saw the latter in terms of a European ethnology, which he prescribed for the Institute during the winter semester 2008 as the name of its study programmes and a third subject name, and which with regard to the European dimension should certainly be taken literally. It was not for nothing that the symposium was initiated by Judith Laister, Eberhart's successor in the *COIMBRA Working Group Social Sciences and Humanities*, for which as an enthusiastic traveller and networker he had acted for many years as a vital link. Thus, our event was able to follow on from the COIMBRA conference in 2007 in Graz, at which scholars from ten European countries had exchanged views on the subject of *Networking across borders and frontiers. Demarcation and Connectedness in European Culture and Society* (Barkhoff and Eberhart 2009). For us our colleague and university politician Helmut Eberhart embodied a European diversity of perspective, but also represented a constant crossing of the border between a lighthearted creative drive with an Austrian social-democratic accent and its governmental monopolisation.

In her words of greeting at the beginning of the two-day symposium, Katharina Eisch-Angus described the slow deliberation and tenacity of an ethnological pragmatist who during the course of his career had rolled countless yellowish-blue faded sheets reeking of methylated spirits through the duplicating machine, as a symbol of a practical 'doing university'. In a university in which accelerated social change has become an end in itself, she saw this 'old way of thinking' not simply as an indicator of backward-looking salvaging and preservation; for her it also stood for the potential of an inquisitive courage, of meaningful world understanding and critical responsibility:

> *Today, in the university slalom between competitive indicators and target values, quantification targets for research output and continuous performance improvement, there is little room for the open spaces in which to think. Substantiated teaching and training in the traditional sense are not necessarily in accord with a university which sells itself as a service provider. The standardised project forms of academic careers increasingly compromise research founded on scientific curiosity, which is supported by professional friendships, content-based debates and shared academic and social concerns. And at the same time, the bold affirmation of the university to*

> *'promote a critical basic attitude' in the younger academic generation contradicts the vanishing scope of teachers and researchers in a bureaucratic university (Eisch-Angus 2018).*

This statement, although it seemed both naive and generalising, provoked a violent and very personal protest from the following speaker, representative of the host university. What was proclaimed here as the golden age of the past was seen as a kick in the teeth for the creative people who were endeavouring to develop a university fit for the future. The criticism cannot be dismissed out of hand.

> *[T]he nostalgic glorification of the university, of the Humboldtian ideal of education and its autonomous, responsible and independent subjects, linked with a generous portion of forgetfulness, allows the talk about 'the' university to rapidly turn into a lament about the increasing difficulty, or even impossibility, of free and independent research under the dictate of progressive economization, efficiency and usefulness (Finzi 2016, 41).*

So, had we once more been taken in by the Western thought in mutually exclusive binarities, which with ivory-tower cultural pessimism makes 'Neoliberalism' together with 'Bologna' and 'Maastricht' the villain of the piece? Here too, Gerald Lind, urges us to take seriously Derrida's idea of the *absolute university*[3]: 'It is up to us to polarise positively the university as an ambiguous space which is in an unhappy love affair with the sciences and the university' (Lind 2016, 28). Nothing could illustrate the productivity of this thought better than the lectures, discussions and conversations of 18–19 October 2018, which, with the simultaneous translations back and forth between English and German by the students and teachers of the Department of Translation Studies, exchanged the experiential perspectives as casually as they changed languages.

We realised that the cultivation and toleration of ambivalences nonetheless fell short strategically, when we set about sharing the lectures with the specialised and university public in a conference publication – in other words, doing exactly what seems to be implied in the requirements of 'impact', 'performance', 'internationality' and 'societal relevance'. It was a process that would take six years, prolonged not only by the pandemic and staff shortages at our Institute, but also marked by frustrating negotiations regarding financing and publication procedures. The idea that initially suggested itself was to create a subject volume for a specialist journal and, in doing so, to deliberately continue the open exchange of the conference as autonomous editorial work in the two languages. Here, however, we had to

3 See also Schönberger's contribution to this volume.

acknowledge that this idea was out of the question from the start, if only because of the requirements of *double-blind peer reviewing* (for example, we opposed a homogenising academic English for all contributions).

Our own university together with the socio-scientific publishing house which we next approached demonstrated to us the way in which the systemic dysfunctionality of governmental (academic) bureaucracy not only takes over critical content but also excludes it (in other words, what Mark Fisher diagnoses as 'reflexive impotence', Fisher 2009: 21). In the meantime, in fact, the publication service of the University of Graz had been repositioned exclusively to encourage Open Access. The decisive factor was no longer the best support available from the publishing house but the least expensive offer for 'Golden Open Access'. In a prolonged 'publication roller-coaster ride'[4], which extended over a large part of 2021, we were first accepted into the German programme of an academic publishing house with a worldwide operation. Then we suddenly received formalised demands from the group's London publishing office, that we should apply as an English-language publication under completely new conditions. Whilst we were able to discuss with our German editor the bureaucratisation and neoliberalisation of the structures of publishers and universities, neither she nor we succeeded in persuading both institutions to agree on common Open-Access procedures, although they complemented each other so well in their rhetoric of maximising societal impact and outreach. We eventually gave up, and it was only in the prospect of publishing the book on a traditional unionist platform and, in doing so, freeing ourselves from the demands regarding topicality and impact that we were (temporarily) able to see our chance.

In the meantime, a great deal has happened. The cooperation within the COIMBRA Working Group Social Sciences & Humanities which had been built up over the years was terminated by the University of Graz. Between 2020 and 2023, in one of the countless committee meetings imposed on the Faculty of Humanities as part of a strategy process, frequently contradictory professional statements and outline concepts were used to cut back our subjects and institutes to 'societal relevance' and 'visibility' – with the aim of thus balancing a supposed economic deficit through the acquisition of external funds and the number of students actively and verifiably fulfilling the predetermined number of credit points.

> *In this way, the faculty is to be strengthened and made sustainable for the future; in future the voice of the humanities should increasingly be heard within society, and the social relevance of the humanities should become considerably more visible.*

4 From an e-mail from Lydia Arantes dated 26.3.2021.

> *The Faculty of Humanities will represent a unit and develop a distinctive profile. In order to make it sustainable in future, the current (diverse) structure of the faculty must therefore also generate a representable added value in research and teaching (Polaschek 2020).*

In 2021, largely unnoticed by the public and also by the younger scholars who were affected by it, the revision of the Austrian law governing universities resulted in further massive restrictions to non-professorial academic university careers. Moreover, in a statement issued by the representative organisation of the Austrian ex-Volkskunde university departments[5], our colleagues saw the wide-ranging progressive potential further eroded, which could be found in particular 'in the (hitherto small) social science and cultural analysis subjects':

> *They convey and develop critical thinking and make available the historical basis for the knowledge, skills, values, experience and significance which constitute culture and society. These are frequently chosen as complementary study subjects and promote interdisciplinary and independent thinking. […] These subjects continue to make an extremely important contribution to the formation of the profile and structure of the universities as well as to the development of a sustainable, values-based and open-minded society, not least through their competence in interdisciplinary cooperation and international intercommunication (GVEKW 2021).*

At the same time the discipline of cultural analysis, European ethnology, cultural anthropology etc. in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, organised within the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (dgv),*[6] also raised its voice in a lively self-understanding. In 2021, the jubilee year of the notable renaming of the former University Institute for German Ethnology in Tübingen in 1971, the venerable parent organisation was to follow suit. It was by no means simply a question of navel-gazing or splitting hairs over names but was a matter above all of the very specific potential of a subject and its methods, which would now be judged by its ability to combine *curiosity* with social *commitment*. By way of example, I should like to quote the comment by Beate Binder from the recording of the (online) podium discussion on 25 March 2021 prior to the planned re-naming of the dgv. In it, Beate Binder and other representatives of the subject spoke up in favour of retaining the specialist term 'European ethnology' alongside 'empirical cultural analysis'. Here it is by no means

5 The *Generalversammlung der Empirischen Kulturwissenschaft in Österreich* (GVEKW), translating as the General Assembly of Empirical Cultural Analysis.

6 Since September 2021 renamed as *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Empirische Kulturwissenschaf*t (English: *German Society for Cultural Analysis | European Ethnology*).

a question of continuing the naming disputes from the past together with the occasionally painful polarisation. However, on the one hand the energetic demands to include ethnography seem relevant in this context

> *as a specific form of knowledge and knowledge production, in which reflexivity plays a major role, in which the fundamentals of normative criticism play a major role, and a specific nexus of empirical theory plays a role (dgv 2021).*

And on the other hand, the European relations should also be kept open intentionally – and this specifically 'not in the sense of area studies or some strangely limited responsibilities', but as a particular competence of this subject, with a post-colonial perspective of

> *focusing on Europe in its global interconnections, the European [region] as an area of knowledge, as a region which is also naturally involved in many developments […], [in order to] decentre it at the same time to some extent (dgv 2021).*

From here we have arrived at the programme of the volume which has been published at last and which derives its relevance as regards university politics and the specifics of the cultural sciences from a triangular relationship. The contributions assemble, firstly, European perspectives, which have arisen over many years in a friendly exchange and which focus on the present transformations of university living and working conditions from in some cases widely differing academic traditions and political constellations from Turkey to Finland, and from Britain and Ireland to Germany and Austria.

Secondly, they take as a starting point the (inter-)disciplinary self-awareness of a committed cultural anthropology, applied cultural analysis and reflexive ethnography, in line with the arguments brought by Boone W. Shear and Susan Brin Hyatt

> *that ethnography, with its emphasis on lived experience, can be a particularly effective tool with which to explore both the slippage, discontinuity and surprise between the global and the local, between structure and agency and between theory and practice (Shear and White 2017: 3).*

And thirdly, we join the authors referred to above to the effect that, despite all the criticism and nebulously clichéd use, we shall retain the term neoliberalism as an umbrella term for an experience-based questioning of the political transformations within universities:

> *Appearing once as heterogenous in its manifestations yet coherent as a project, neoliberalism can operate as a sort of master signifier that gathers together a motley*

> *mix of social processes and deleterious conditions in the social field (Shear and White 2017: 4).*

The application of neoliberal principles to university research and education brings with it a great power of interpretation for figures, 'metric power' (Beer 2016). This is reflected, for example, in the imperative to publish, also known under the motto 'publish or perish'.

> *Metric power, as an outgrowth of neoliberal ideology, holds sway over academic livelihoods in other ways. Perhaps most pernicious are the pressures and attendant metrics of publication. In the UK, the familiar 'publish or perish' motto has been re-written. It is no longer enough just to publish; one must publish in the 'right' formats, with the 'right' presses, in the 'right' journals and in the 'right' timeframes (Feldman and Sandoval 2018: 221).*

There is virtually no time and leisure to allow publications to mature. The machine must be kept running. The original aim, to publish this volume without delay, is no exception. And yet, the publishing roller-coaster ride described above on the one hand and the Covid-19 pandemic on the other brought about a temporary lull in the publishing endeavour. *Curiosity* and *commitment* could not automatically be kept on the move. The obstacles which blocked the path of our project seemed too paralysing for us to be able to pursue the publication imperative. So, what should we do? Abandon it entirely? Because the texts are old?

Revisiting the texts, however, quickly revealed that they have by no means lost their validity. Ultimately, the enforced necessity of taking our time and letting them rest has shown clearly that the texts do not represent a short-lived snapshot, but rather afford an insight into changes which continue to have profound effects on research and teaching.

Overview of Contributions

The contributions featured in this edited volume cover a range of case studies from different European countries, each showcasing different challenges as well as opportunities in light of the transformation of European universities and the shifting demands in the tertiary education sector. While Klaus Schönberger and, more explicitly, Johannes Moser unravel developments within the Austrian and German academic landscape based on their own experience as professors of cultural anthropology/European ethnology, dean or members of university boards etc., Britta Kalkreuter, a design researcher, and Jürgen Barkhoff, a German studies scholar,

give cautiously optimistic insights into UK and Irish contexts. Furthermore, Güldem Baykal Büyüksaraç uncovers her 'response-abilities' as an anthropologist and action researcher working with local communities in Turkey. Sanja Potkonjak and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević reflect on the changing role of the university within the neoliberal economies of knowledge based on two Croatian research projects. Finally, the folklore researcher Ulrika Wolf-Knuts uses the *Åbo Akademi University* in Finland as case study in order to carve out various differences between before and after the University Act of 2009 which transformed universities into enterprises.

Applied Cultural Anthropology

The question of what applied anthropology is and what kinds of needs and whose needs it satisfies, is particularly dealt with in Büyüksaraç's and Schönberger's contributions. Büyüksaraç advocates for an applied anthropology that is community-engaged and thus transforms the researcher into a mediator between policy makers and local communities. In her cross-disciplinary work at the intersection of communities, local government, state bureaucracy, archaeological and environmental expertise, as well as heritage tourism, she does not only raise public awareness about the immediate concern of her research participants (e.g., access to natural resources, land-use, and property rights) but also contributes to the communities' well-being. Reflecting on her own role as researcher and advocate, she therefore also addresses the so-called anthropological debt: the 'obligation of "giving back" to the communities we intrude into and desire to mingle with as we conduct our research'. However, she also warns of the pitfalls going along with this kind of applied anthropology, namely the dilemma of paternalising those we want to make heard.

Schönberger's take on applied cultural anthropology takes a different route. As professor for cultural anthropology at the University of Klagenfurt/Austria, he is involved in developing and teaching (within) the only *applied* study program offered at Austrian departments of cultural anthropology/European ethnology/cultural analysis. Schönberger is on the one hand critical of the marketisation of the university and the notions of applicable research it has been bringing with it. On the other hand, he suggests a pro-active approach which involves a closer look at what applied anthropology is and could be. Instead of playing theory off against practice – as comes out in his students' criticism towards theory as irrelevant for their future professional practice –, he argues in favour of theory as a fundamental part of *and* unquestionable requirement for practice.

Both, Schönberger and Wolf-Knuts, mention other dilemmas apart from paternalism that applied anthropology might entail, i.e. serving nationalist agendas. Wolf-

Knuts sees the temptation in some countries to carry out nationalistic research in the fact that – in times of the autonomous university's need to acquire external funding – it is income-yielding and wonders: 'Can we shape the study of culture in such a way that it works as a counter-weight to nationalism?' Schönberger points to the case of Carinthia, itself tangled up in eras where folkloristic knowledge was instrumentalised in various ways, such as the 1930ies, the Haider-era as well as commodification of folk culture in the context of tourism. Tourism being one of the sectors where students of Applied Cultural Studies[7] will find jobs, he asks us to rethink which knowledge about folk culture and invented traditions we ought to pass on. His pragmatic suggestion is to convey knowledge that makes students fit for the job market and renders them critical of folklorism as well as of the widespread dichotomy between authenticity and commercialisation.

Neoliberalisation of Academic Research and Higher Education

Neoliberal university reform is another topical complex illustrated, at least in passing, by most authors and contributions in this volume. Johannes Moser in particular identifies and discusses two decisive changes within the academic landscape in Germany in this regard: the so-called Bologna-reform of Higher Education – turning students into clients of a service enterprise – and the strong focus on third-party funding. The former has led to financial means increasingly being allocated to the administration, management, and evaluation of universities, whereas these means would serve the improvement of teaching and research conditions much better, as he laments. The latter not only entails the tailoring of research ideas to the duration of research projects and funding possibilities but also has ramifications towards further precarisation of research staff.

Based on two projects carried out under their supervision at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Zagreb, Potkonjak and Škrbić Alempijević draw attention to the contradictory demands that cultural anthropology is faced with in Croatia. The first project involved a labour market analysis as well as a survey among alumni and sought to uncover the skills and knowledge students need to acquire in order to be fit for the market. In contrast, the second one, beautifully entitled *Images of Utopia*, grasped ethnographically what university might be able to contribute to students becoming 'active citizens'. Their paper points us directly to the delicate balancing act of disciplines such as Anthropology/Ethnology in its various shapes and sizes: at once conforming to labour market logics and at the

7 The original German denomination of the study program is ‚Angewandte Empirische Kulturwissenschaft'.

same time educating students into critically and socially engaged members of society.

In her comparative portrait of the Finnish *Åbo Akademi University*, Wolf-Knuts takes a glance at differences before and after the Finnish Universities Act 2009 taking effect. In a brisk survey of several facets of the university as an institution – financial matters, university politics and administration, students, research, teaching, research profiles and projects etc. – she carves out differences between the time before and after the reform. She further argues that free and experimental research (also due to the peer review process) has become rare. Finally, she maintains that according to the Act the so-called third mission has gained such currency that university staff and students are called on to 'serve their country and humanity at large'.

Societal Relevance

Wolf-Knuts and Potkonjak and Škrbić Alempijević both raise an issue which is also central in other contributions, i.e. that of societal relevance or societal impact respectively. Interestingly, both contributions referring to the UK context develop a positive reading of impact-driven research. Impact is, as Barkhoff shows, a concept the Humanities rather try to shy away from – unnecessarily, as he affirms at the same time. Being versed in the so-called REF (Research Excellence Framework) which regularly audits UK universities also in terms of societal impact, he holds that Humanities have a lot to gain from an engaged and encouraged approach and showcases two particular projects from Anthropology and Religious Studies that illustrate how social engagement and societal impact can be conveyed as such to funding agencies and other stakeholders alike. For this reason, Barkhoff encourages us to 'develop a culture of research design that always includes a dimension beyond academia'.

In her text situated at the crossroads of design research and education as well as questions of making a sustainable future, Britta Kalkreuter asks how the University discipline of design currently meets global challenges. Finding itself at the heart of many a political debate, design is seen as the 'main driver for overconsumption' and at the same time recognised as a cure-all for going green, as she argues. Therefore, she argues in favour of design research and education as 'enriching community and society by presenting ideas for preferable futures rather than offering solutions for (often individual) economic growth in the short term'.

While Wolf-Knuts is hesitant to affirm that the situation for the Humanities and Arts has improved in the last decade, most of the authors would at least agree that 'back

then' everything was not really better than today. With this careful but hopeful optimism, we wish to have sparked an interest in these contributions that – while pointing to delicate balancing acts the neoliberal university reform has brought with it – make a strong case that Anthropology has much to give and to contribute to a better future for all of us.

Postscript: Shortly after the introduction was first drafted, another colleague joined us at the Institute, Caroline Gatt, who is currently involved in research and teaching on similar topics. We have therefore spontaneously invited her to write a concluding commentary that takes the contributions further, in terms of content, disciplinary background and perspective. *Neoliberalism and Coloniality are Two Sides of the Same Coin* is the title of her commentary, referring to the interconnectedness of these global developments, both of which are permeated by 'globalizing knowledge capitalism'. Referring to studies by Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality scholars, she argues that a critique of the neoliberalisation of Higher Education and academic research must necessarily also include a critique of epistemic coloniality.

Translated by Jane Michael (pp. 13–20)

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