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**THE “NEW SPIRIT OF ACADEMIC CAPITALISM”:  
CAN SCIENTISTS CREATE  
GENERATIVE CRITIQUE  
FROM WITHIN?**

**Abstract:** *The 21<sup>st</sup>-century university is a contested site of neoliberal transformation. Its role is moving away from that of a hub of culture, knowledge and critique to that of a provider of skills and employability for the market. The move towards a lean business model in the management of knowledge production is not an isolated phenomenon, but integral to the shifting economic, political and moral landscapes of global capitalism and the knowledge society. The literature discussing the changes in higher education, which could be collectively termed “critical studies of academia”, remains fragmented and is yet to yield tangible resistance or envision viable alternative models of academic governance. This article discusses the possibility of generating constructive critique of “the new spirit of academic capitalism” from within. French Convention Theory is employed as a conceptual toolbox for unpacking the worlds of worth, conventions and justifications which operate beneath the surface of the marketisation, acceleration and casualisation of scientific labour – and suggested as a potential tool for building a generative sociology of critique.*

**Keywords:** *convention theory; higher education; neoliberalism; marketisation; “new spirit of academic capitalism”; sociology of critique*

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**„Nový duch akademického kapitalismu“: mohou vědci vytvořit generativní kritiku zevnitř?**

**Abstrakt:** *Univerzita 21. století je místem napadeným neoliberální transformací. Stává se dodavatelkou dovedností a pracovní síly. Zároveň tím opouští svoje postavení hlavního společenského ohniska kultury, poznání a kritiky. Tento posun ke ztěžtlenému obchodnímu modelu, který je vlastní produkci vědění, však není izolovaným jevem – je součástí měnících se ekonomických, politických a morálních krajin globálního kapitalismu a společnosti vědění. Literatura analyzující tyto změny – lze ji souhrnně nazvat jako “kritická studia akademie” – však zůstává roztržštěná a zatím nenabízí skutečnou rezistenci nebo představy životaschopných alternativních modelů akademického vládnutí a správy (governance). Tento článek pojednává o možnosti formulování konstruktivní kritiky “nového ducha akademického kapitalismu”, a to zevnitř samotné akademie. Francouzská teorie konvencí je využita jako sada koncepčních nástrojů k analýze hodnotových světů, konvencí a způsobů ospravedlnění ležících pod povrchem marketizace, zrychlení a nestálosti podmínek vědecké práce. Článek též tvrdí že teorie konvencí představuje potenciální instrument vhodný ke konstrukci generativní sociologie kritiky.*

**Klíčová slova:** *teorie konvence; vyšší vzdělávání; neoliberalismus; marketizace; “nový duch akademického kapitalismu”; sociologie kritiky*

## Introduction

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's analysis of the rise of managerialist discourses in the period from 1965 to 1995 concluded that these discourses are an expression of the rise of "the new spirit of capitalism".<sup>1</sup> Their research was a response to the waning collective critique, weakening protest movements, and the decline of Marxism since the 1980s. Working within a tradition in French economic sociology known as the Conventions School,<sup>2</sup> they argued that a critical sociology which dispassionately deconstructs the social, ignoring the values which motivate agents, is insufficient and can even be harmful. It must be replaced by a "sociology of critique" which is sensitive to values. Boltanski and Chiapello sought to develop such a sociology of critique which could detect capitalism's legitimating principles. This sociology of critique bridges individualism with holism by combining macro and micro approaches to understanding the social world. It integrates *critical sociology*, with its attention to macro-entities such as capitalism, with *pragmatic sociology* sensitive to social actions, the explicit justifications given by individual and collective agents for their actions, and the implicit normative frameworks which guide (but never fully determine) them.

This article presents an application of Convention Theory, and in particular Boltanski and Chiapello's idea of the new spirit of capitalism, to unpack the workings of contemporary academia. The current state of the critical literature on academia and higher education (which can be collectively termed "critical studies of academia") is discussed. The article addresses the interpretative deficit and the weakness of existing critique of what we can call the "new spirit of academic capitalism", as a specific case

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<sup>1</sup> Luc BOLTANSKI – Ève CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The French name "economics of conventions" (*l'économie des conventions*) is rarely used in English, to avoid confusion with mathematical approaches in economics, specifically the strand of game theory known as "economics of convention". Different sources use "convention theory", "the conventions school", "economic sociology of conventions", "economic theory of conventions", or "intersubjective economics". Here its shortest name is used: convention theory (CT). Boltanski and Chiapello's work also draws on the so-called Regulation School in French sociology, but this aspect is not discussed here due to limitations of space.

of the more general argument in Boltanski and Chiapello's work. A conceptual frame is sketched with the dual aim to give a language for a sociology of critique of academia, on the one hand, and to promote change, on the other. The key argument is that several problems with the existing literature necessitate the development of a more coherent conceptual framework and vocabulary, through which the critical literature on academia can provide generative, rather than fatalistic, critique. By "constructive" or "generative" critique of the academic system, I mean a critique which not only points out strengths or shortcomings, but also understands the reasons why things are this way and not otherwise, and which offers directions for discussing, and ultimately producing, meaningful collective change of the ways in which the system operates. After examining the literature, some key terms from convention theory are briefly outlined, to be applied to the analysis. Lastly, the possibility for academics and scientists to build generative critique of their institutions from within those institutions is then addressed, using real-life examples of academics' engagement with the British academic system, discussed through a "convention theory" lens.

### **The "new spirit of academic capitalism": Precarity, acceleration and marketisation in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century university**

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century university has become a contested site of managerial transformation.<sup>3</sup> The very fabric of the university and the meaning of scientific knowledge are changing before our eyes.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of higher education (HE) is shifting away from the Humboldtian ideal of a "community of scholars and students" devoted to the creation of public good by combining teaching and research in search for impartial truth,<sup>5</sup> towards an increasingly

<sup>3</sup> Roger BROWN – Helen CARASSO, *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education*. London: Society for Research into Higher Education – Routledge 2013; Benjamin GINSBERG, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011; Rosemary DEEM, "The Knowledge Worker, the Manager-Academic and the Contemporary UK University: New and Old Forms of Public Management?" *Financial Accountability & Management*, vol. 20, 2004, no. 2, pp. 107–128.

<sup>4</sup> Filip VOSTAL – Lorenzo SILVAGGI – Rosa VASILAKI, "One-Dimensional University Realised: Capitalist Ethos and Ideological Shifts in Higher Education." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 8, 2011, no. 1, pp. 62–82.

<sup>5</sup> Robert ANDERSON, "The 'Idea of a University' Today" [online]. In: WITHERS, K. (ed.), *First class? Challenges and Opportunities for the UK's University Sector*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research 2009. Available at: <<http://www.ippr.org/publications/55/1716/first-classchallenges-and-opportunities-for-the-uks-university-sector>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

instrumental institution whose role is to educate large proportions of society in order to produce the technical skills needed to fuel the “knowledge economy”. In the words of Kathleen Lynch, the university is being redefined as a place for human capital acquisition and for training the ideal neoliberal citizen: “a self-sufficient, rational, competitive economic actor”, a cosmopolitan worker built around a calculating, entrepreneurial and detached self; however, this occurs “at the expense of more broadly-based moral and social values related to care, autonomy, tolerance, respect, trust and equality”.<sup>6</sup>

The paradigm of “new public management” (NPM), which has become the dominant model of university management, first emerged in the USA as a response to the economic stagnation of the 1970s. NPM combines two main ideas: new institutional economics theories (public choice theory, agency theory and transactions-cost analysis) and the use of private-sector tools in the public sector to improve efficiency, accountability and performance<sup>7</sup>. The core assumption is that “the market is the primary producer of cultural logic and value and that solutions to societal ills and the management of social change can be best understood through the deployment of market logic and market mechanisms”.<sup>8</sup> Accountability and efficiency are achieved through indicator-based performance assessment and the marketisation, privatisation, outsourcing and devolution of management.

The New Zealand reforms in the 1980s, which included education, were the first rigorous NPM-based public sector reforms and were observed enthusiastically by policy makers worldwide. NPM was seen as a progressive public administration reform capable of resisting the negative features of entrenched administrations, such as nepotism, red tape and evasion of audit and change, by putting the citizen (customer) at the core of management. NPM-inspired ideas quickly spread into different public sectors in the rest of the Anglo-Saxon academic world, starting with the USA, soon followed by Great Britain and since more recently Europe.

In education, marketisation and the shift towards managerialism constitute a radical change with unexpected side effects. The key features of the neoliberal university include its focus on impact and value for money of research and teaching, a strict audit culture, the framing of students as con-

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen LYNCH, “New Managerialism, Neoliberalism and Ranking.” *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, vol. 13, 2014, no. 2, pp. 141–153.

<sup>7</sup> Judy WHITCOMBE, “Contributions and Challenges of ‘New Public Management’: New Zealand Since 1984.” *Policy Quarterly*, vol. 4, 2008, no. 3, pp. 7–13.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen LYNCH, “New Managerialism: The Impact on Education.” *Concept*, vol. 5, 2014, no. 3, pp. 1–11.

sumers of education services whose main aim is to gain "employability" on the labour market after graduation. The university has become a "corporate", "entrepreneurial" institution<sup>9</sup> characterised by increasing bureaucratisation, an "explosion" of audit,<sup>10</sup> "metricisation" of quality control in knowledge production<sup>11</sup> and an increasingly deprofessionalised, precarious and over-worked workforce.<sup>12</sup> Academic work and the academic labour market are increasingly international and fast-paced. Research and teaching cultures worldwide are becoming homogenised after the model of American universities.<sup>13</sup> Institutions in the global periphery, or at least those of them which want to compete on the global market for academic labour and knowledge production, actively participate in this change by attempting to emulate the values and practices of global academic capitalism.

Academic NPM has redefined academic "leadership"<sup>14</sup> and "excellence" and began to influence the choice of research questions, methodological approaches, the way research findings are presented and appraised, academics' and students' workplace activities and long-term career patterns.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the explosion of knowledge content, the overspecialisation and fractalisation of academic subfields, along with a for-profit paywall publishing model, the pressure on research academics to fund their own research by constantly acquiring research grants, while teaching larger numbers of students and producing more work under the imperative to "publish or perish" and moving between increasingly precarious and short-term jobs, are redefining what it means to be a scientist. University faculty are facing fast

<sup>9</sup> Sheila SLAUGHTER – Gary RHOADES, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Michael POWER, *The Audit Explosion*. London: Demos 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Aidan KELLY – Roger BURROWS, "Measuring the Value of Sociology? Some Notes on Performative Metricisation in the Contemporary Academy." In: ADKINS, L. – LURY, C. (eds.) *Measure and Value*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell 2012, pp. 130–150. See also other work by Burrows.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind GILL, "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neoliberal Academia." In: FLOOD, R. – GILL, R. (eds.), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. London: Routledge 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Simon MARGINSON, "Global Field and Global Imagining: Bourdieu and Worldwide Higher Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 29, 2008, no. 3, 2008, pp. 303–315.

<sup>14</sup> Suman GUPTA, "Get Rid of Academic Leadership," [online]. 2015. Available at: <<http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/finance-crisis-protest/comment-and-debate/get-rid-academic-leadership>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>15</sup> Sarah BROUILLETTE, "Academic Labor, the Aesthetics of Management, and the Promise of Autonomous Work," [online]. 2013. Available at: <<http://nonsite.org/article/academic-labor-the-aesthetics-of-management-and-the-promise-of-autonomous-work>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

increasing levels of employment precarity, casualisation, insecurity, worsening employment conditions and transnational career trajectories.<sup>16</sup>

The marketisation of UK universities has, indeed, preceded (though the causal effect is not clear) some accelerated short-term successes in what is now termed “research outputs” and student satisfaction. The marketisation of universities has happened alongside their democratisation, their opening to larger numbers of students, and efforts to increase the representation of numerous underrepresented minorities (women, disabled people, people of colour and others). However, the piecemeal approach to education policy<sup>17</sup> and the culture of short-termism and empiricism in research priorities favour “demonstrable impact” over fundamental knowledge. The number of undergraduate and doctoral graduates has become disproportionate for the job market open for them upon graduation. In the UK in particular, the shifting of the education costs onto individuals with the drastic raise of UK university fees in recent years serves to further entrench existing class inequalities. Unsurprisingly, in the UK, the shift in values and practices is most visible in the highest-ranking research-focused universities.

We shall refer to this currently dominant model of knowledge production and organisation as “the new spirit of academic capitalism”, borrowing the phrase introduced by Boltanski and Chiapello.<sup>18</sup> Before discussing its relevance, let us briefly sketch the main directions of existing critique.

### **Critical Studies of Academia**

How has the academic literature responded to the neomanagerialist transformation of higher education? The implications of this transformation are subject to much disagreement among academic practitioners, analysts and other “actors” in the academic “field”, ranging from enthusiastic approval and cautious implementation, to quiet dissent, active rejection and vocal critique. A growing body of critical studies have emerged in the past decade, tackling the recent transformations of values and practices in HE and academic governance. This rich, but disorganised critical literature could

<sup>16</sup> “Precarious Work in Higher Education: A Snapshot of Insecure Contracts and Institutional Attitudes,” [online]. 2015. Report by the British University and College Union (UCU). Available at: <[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu\\_precariousscorect\\_rct\\_hereport\\_apr16.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu_precariousscorect_rct_hereport_apr16.pdf)> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>17</sup> BROWN – CARASSO, *Everything for Sale*.

<sup>18</sup> BOLTANSKI – CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

be termed, for short, "critical studies of academia" (CSA). Currently sociology, women and gender studies of academia and anthropology of education are the most active. One problem is the fragmented nature of the literature, split across a number of social science disciplines, without sufficient cross-disciplinary dialogue. Notably, some of the disciplines, such as science and technology studies (STS), have largely evaded questions of marketisation and related institutional changes in academic science. Large sections of (higher) education and pedagogy studies in Europe and the UK are predominantly preoccupied with the development of new teaching and learning tools, assessment mechanisms, or engaging further sections of the student populace (undoubtedly important questions which, however, enthusiastically take the current system for granted). Secondly, and linked to that, much of the literature largely focuses on the humanities and social sciences and generalises on the basis of a narrow evidential basis, remaining conspicuously silent on the situation in the non-social (natural and mathematical) sciences. Perhaps most importantly, much of the literature tends heavily towards methodological individualism which makes it weak at understanding deeper social, economic and normative structures. This weakness of reflexivity – combined with, but not remedied by, a heightened attention to aspects of individual psychological suffering caused by neoliberal academia – reduces potential generative critique to angry criticism of current trends in academia.

Some sociology and education studies literature explores professional identities in higher education, sometimes adding a policy and labour market perspective to academia.<sup>19</sup> Such studies provide ample evidence of the changing content of academic work and career patterns and can form a sound base for substantial critique.

One of the earliest strands of critical literature discusses academia in the context of broader neoliberal transformations providing, in Boltanski and Chiapello's framework, a social critique. In 1997, Slaughter & Leslie<sup>20</sup> were among the first critical theorists of "academic capitalism" in the USA,

<sup>19</sup> Celia WHITCHURCH – George GORDON, *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*. London: Routledge 2009; Ronald BARNETT – Roberto DI NAPOLI, *Changing Identities in Higher Education: Voicing Perspective*. London: Routledge 2007; Lynn MCALPINE – Gerlese AKERLIND, *Becoming an Academic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010; Lynne GORNALL – Caryn COOK – Lyn DAUNTON – Jane SALISBURY – Brychan THOMAS, *Academic Working Lives: Experience, Practice and Change*. London – New York: Bloomsbury 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Sheila SLAUGHTER – Larry L. LESLIE, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1997.

Canada, Australia and the UK. They noted the “triple helix” of universities, industry and government and argued that the “neoliberal” audit culture of the “entrepreneurial university” and the globalisation of the political economy at the end of the twentieth century destabilised the traditional patterns of professional academic work in the west. In the UK, the managerialisation of HE became starkly visible a decade later. An example of the more vocal and provocative critiques is the work of Chris Lorenz<sup>21</sup> who gives a historical overview of academic neoliberalisation and argues that it poses a fundamental threat to education. He terms the NPM discourse employed in neoliberal educational policies “a bullshit discourse”, linking it to George Orwell and Harry Frankfurt, because it “parasitises” the everyday meanings of their concepts (efficiency, accountability, transparency, quality and excellence), thus perverting their original meanings. Similarly, Vostal et al. write of the “unprecedented assault on Higher Education”.<sup>22</sup> Less provocatively, but in the same vein, Nick Couldry critiques the advent of the “impact entrepreneur” in the academic workplace and calls for “postneoliberal” values centred on “voice as a value”.<sup>23</sup>

Another strand of critique provides mainly artistic critique in Boltanski and Chiapello’s sense, focusing on the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism. Examples include the work of John Holmwood,<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Lynch<sup>25</sup> and collaborators,<sup>26</sup> Rosemary Deem<sup>27</sup> and others. Their work focuses on various negative aspects of marketisation, precarious employment, time pressure and neoliberal governance on academic researchers. Lynch in particular takes a well-argued historical perspective on new managerialism and focuses on a number of key areas such as governmentality and the internalization

<sup>21</sup> Chris LORENZ, “If You’re so Smart, Why Are You Under Surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism, and New Public Management.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, 2012, no. 3, pp. 599–629.

<sup>22</sup> VOSTAL – SILVAGGI – VASILAKI, “One-Dimensional University Realised,” p. 62 (62–82).

<sup>23</sup> Nick COULDRY, “Post-Neoliberal Academic Values: Notes from the UK Higher Education Sector”. In: ZELIZER, B. (ed.), *Making the University Matter: Shaping Inquiry in Culture, Communication and Media Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge 2011, pp. 135–143.

<sup>24</sup> John HOLMWOOD, “Sociology’s Misfortune: Disciplines, Interdisciplinarity and the Impact of Audit Culture.” *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 14, 2010, no. 4, p. 649 (639–658).

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen LYNCH, “New Managerialism: The Impact on Education,” [online]. *Concept*, vol. 5, 2014, no. 3. Available at: <<http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/index.php/Concept/article/view/271>> [cit.1.9.2016].

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen LYNCH – Bernie GRUMMELL – Dymphna DEVINE, *New Managerialism in Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Rosemary DEEM – Sam HILLYARD – Michael REED, *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.



of managerialism, the gender inequalities within the academic community based on who does the care work, academia as employment and a labour market, etc. Her work thus serves as a useful descriptive and analytical basis for critique. Holmwood argues that marketisation undermines academic sociology in particular and more generally has led universities to lose their voice in the democratic public sphere.<sup>28</sup>

A later, third strand of literature has emerged, focusing on the micro scale of the problem. This literature tackles the affective impact of neoliberal academia on its workers, their emotions and psychological wellbeing. This topic is mainly represented in sociology, especially feminist studies, and since more recently has been discovered in psychology. Feminist critical writings and practices in particular expose the micro-politics of power in academia (one recent example of both practical and theoretical small-scale resistance is the feminist academic collective "Res-Sisters" who published a collaborative article in which they also called for better academic practices).<sup>29</sup> Foucauldian critiques of neoliberalism focus on the interplay between new forms of discipline and the formation of the academic autonomous, rational, self-auditing person as an ideal neoliberal subject. Feminist ethnographer and sociologist Pereira<sup>30</sup> discusses affect and "mood" in Portuguese academia. In psychology, only a few recent US studies, and so far none in the UK, explore the striking prevalence of anxiety among faculty, in particular underlining the negative effects of precarity and unstable employment conditions on wellbeing.<sup>31</sup> But it is worth returning to Rosalind Gill's 2009 article on the "hidden injuries of neoliberal academia"<sup>32</sup> because it became practically viral among British academics and became one of the flagship works which marked the current explosion of British literature critiquing (and criticising) the impact of neoliberalisation specifically on academic careers, working lives and identities. The particular popularity of Gill's article is itself symptomatic

<sup>28</sup> John HOLMWOOD, "Markets, Expertise and the Public University: A Crisis in Knowledge for Democracy?" [online]. Available at: <<http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/media/john-holmwood-education-neoliberalism-and-democracy>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>29</sup> "The Res-Sisters," [online]. Available at: <<https://canndo.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/res-sisters-2015/>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>30</sup> Maria do Mar PEREIRA, *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia*. London: Routledge, forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup> For a study of psychology faculty, see Gretchen M. REEVY – Grace DEASON, "Predictors of Depression, Stress, and Anxiety among Non-Tenure Track Faculty," [online]. 2014. *Front. Psychol.* Available at: <<http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00701/full>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>32</sup> GILL, "The Hidden Injuries."

of how silenced academics' voices had become until very recently in the whirlwind marketisation and precarisation of their labour. Gill's distinctly individualist approach is to explore the anxieties and worries caused by the institutional context of academic labour. By excusing it as "not an exercise in self-indulgence or narcissism or even an opportunity to have a good moan", Gill positions her text on the uncomfortable verge between dispassionate analysis and passionate confession. The need to deal with long suppressed negative work-related emotions through academic publication demonstrates how deep the perniciously "toxic" effects of the university's transformation have become – and her article itself arguably also constitutes a subversive act of desperate, but forceful, resistance.

The acceleration and intensification of academic life, discussed in several articles in the current special issue of this journal, has recently developed as another, fourth, distinct theme within the critical UK and European literature.<sup>33</sup> Acceleration critics come from a philosophy of time perspective and argue that the audit culture and acceleration of academic labour affect not just the lives of faculty, but also the rigour of scientific work and the quality of the knowledge it produces. Like marketisation, acceleration in academia is not isolated from the overall technology-assisted acceleration of social life<sup>34</sup> which in turn is a fundamental reproductive feature of capital circulation and accumulation within a capitalist economy.<sup>35</sup> Filip Vostal<sup>36</sup> warns that "the acceleration of contemporary academic practices is detrimental to the "organic reproductive rhythms of sociology" and that "[e]xperimenting, thinking through, and writing are slow, contemplative, and time-consuming attributes of research. If academics (are forced to) speed up these activities, they may compromise accuracy, correctness, and validity". He underlines the dramatically uneven nature of acceleration and the need to recognise different "'zones of time' or 'timescapes' moving at different tempos", rather than some "unified high-speed flux". Vostal examines the changing temporality of academia and deconstructs the origins of its acceleration. His analysis

<sup>33</sup> For a comprehensive literature review, see Filip VOSTAL, "Temporalities of Academic Work." In: PETERS, M. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Singapore: Springer 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas GANE, "Speed Up or Slow Down? Social Theory in the Information Age." *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 9, 2006, no. 1, p. 21 (20–38).

<sup>35</sup> Filip VOSTAL, "Sociology's Rhythms: Temporal Dimensions of Knowledge Production." *Theory of Science*, vol. 35, 2013, pp. 499–524.

<sup>36</sup> Filip VOSTAL, *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time*. Basingstoke: Palgrave 2016.

is incisive and makes an important link with the broader phenomenon of acceleration in today's world<sup>37</sup> and demonstrates convincingly the changing situation in academia, but it stops short of discussing the underlying labour market and policy realities which drive the changes.

The acceleration literature in particular lends itself to further dangers. It is important to remember that acceleration is relative to a(n arbitrarily chosen) reference point. Something which is "accelerating" was necessarily slower in the past – yet we have no unambiguous measure of the "speed" of knowledge. The cross-generational applicability of the acceleration concept is unclear: will young researchers born into the "digital native" generations perceive it differently to older colleagues? How much of our perceptions of acceleration are due to objective acceleration and how much are effects of our social age and life stage? Is our critique of acceleration too self-referential: for example, why do companies in innovation-driven industries in particular still see academia as slow and cumbersome?<sup>38</sup> Last but not least, we must not assume that acceleration is "all bad" or that academics are powerless to address it: many resistance practices have emerged, aimed at neutralising or reversing acceleration, but also the acceleration of life in general and academia in particular is embraced more enthusiastically by some than by others. We cannot observe or measure acceleration as a simple linear process or an abstract homogenous phenomenon, but we must pay attention to the rhythms and paces of work and careers across disciplines, employment situations, life course stages, genders, in institutions differently positioned across the international scientific field.

For the sake of arriving at a common vision of the future of the university, it would be beneficial to unite these multifaceted and incisive but disparate critiques of academia, traversing different fields, under an interdisciplinary field such as "critical studies of academia". More importantly, several important blind spots remain.

One is the conflation of critique and criticism. Much of the burgeoning critical literature is not only critiquing, but also – more reductively – criticising neoliberal academic governance, values and practices, sometimes at the same time (the current article makes no exception). This conflation is understandable, as it is caused by the partially self-referential nature of the

<sup>37</sup> GANE, "Speed Up or Slow Down?" p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> "The Sloan Review: How to Create Productive Partnerships with Universities," [online]. Available at: <<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-create-productive-partnerships-with-universities>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

topic. As researchers of higher education we remain higher education workers; research of academia is also academic research, i.e. research produced within academic institutions, following academic conventions, by academic actors. Many critical analysts are also activists, and even those who are not have formed their opinions partly based on their personal experiences. Our “insider positionality”<sup>39</sup> gives us a detailed view, but is potentially problematic: while being part of our own research object does not invalidate research efforts, it does make reflexivity even more important for ensuring that our findings are reliable and valid (elsewhere I argue that an insider positionality can be harnessed for the benefit of research).<sup>40</sup>

Another important blind spot of the “critical studies in academia” literature so far is its limited disciplinary focus on the humanities and social sciences. The implicit assumption that the so-called “hard” sciences benefit, or at least do not suffer, from marketisation, is unwarranted. It is true that the idea of a “knowledge economy” and “productive science” are modelled on the hard sciences and are, arguably, unsuited and even detrimental to the humanities and social sciences. There is evidence that the natural and mathematical sciences face the very same challenges.<sup>41</sup> Ignoring large swathes of academia not only renders our understanding incomplete; it also weakens our critique.

The insufficient reflexivity and attention to institutions and structures renders some of the potentially important critique weak and even counter-productive. For example, the most notable practical application of the acceleration critique, the “Slow University” or “Slow Science” movement,<sup>42</sup> has been criticised for ignoring labour market realities and for entrenching the

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Melanie J. GREENE, “On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research,” [online]. *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 19, 2014, no. 19, pp. 1–13. Available at: <<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/greene15.pdf>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>40</sup> Milena KREMAKOVA, “Trust, Access and Sensitive Boundaries Between ‘Public’ and ‘Private’: A Returning Insider’s Experience of Research in Bulgaria,” [online]. *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 19, 2014, no. 4. Available at: <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/4/12.html>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>41</sup> Milena KREMAKOVA, *Mathematicians Against the Clock: Accelerated Work and Accelerated Careers in the Neoliberal University*, [online]. Available at: <<http://www.blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/03/03/mathematicians-against-the-clock-neoliberal-university>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>42</sup> “Slow Science,” [online]. Available at: <<http://slow-science.org>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

existing inequalities between permanent and insecure faculty.<sup>43</sup> The fact that the prevailing advice for coping with acceleration boils down to individual measures such as saying "no", turning off email and forcefully "slowing down" reveals that this literature is oblivious to the larger structures at play. The solutions it offers are no more productive than the offerings of the currently burgeoning body of uncritical advice and self-help literature<sup>44</sup> dedicated to helping lecturers and researchers become better neoliberal subjects, which does not belong to the "critical studies of academia", but is widely read by early-career academics. Without giving up the important insights gained by micro-level individualist critique, it is imperative to also understand why it is so and not otherwise, before trying to change it. Academia is not merely the sum of individuals but an institution inextricably bound with national and global policy, politics and economy.

### **The new spirit of academic capitalism: a possible common framework for critical studies of academia?**

Any critique of the current predicament of academia is necessarily simultaneously a social-analytical and a political project. While such critique from within brings the danger of bias, it is inevitable and necessary nevertheless. As Boltanski and Chiapello remind us in the introduction to their book's second edition, a critical approach has value only if we believe that it can "serve to inflect human beings' action, and that this action can itself help to change the course of things in the direction of further 'liberation'".<sup>45</sup> Many directions are possible. The rest of this article sketches one possible framework by linking the issues at the core of "critical academic studies" with the explanatory potential of French Convention Theory. The phrase "new spirit of academic capitalism" is a conceptual shorthand for unpacking the shifting worlds of worth, conventions and justifications which underpin the changes in academia.

<sup>43</sup> Heather MENDICK, "Social Class, Gender and the Pace of Academic Life: What Kind of Solution is Slow?" *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 15, 2014, no. 3, Art. 7, [online]. Available at: <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2224/3694>> [cit. 1.9.2016].

<sup>44</sup> One of many recent examples: Heather FRY – Steve KETTERIDGE – Stephanie MARSHALL, *The Effective Academic: A Handbook for Enhanced Academic Practice*. London: Routledge 2014.

<sup>45</sup> BOLTANSKI – CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. x.

Convention theory (CT) is a relatively new analytical approach to economic and social co-ordination, originating in France in the 1980s as part of the cognitive turn in the social sciences. It is based on the French economics of collective action and goes beyond methodological individualism. At its core is the recognition that coordination among social actors is intrinsically problematic due to the radical, pervasive uncertainty that surrounds all actions (distinguishing between calculable risk and incalculable uncertainty). Co-ordinating actions in everyday life is possible on the basis of existing, but not entirely fixed, conventions. Actors employ conventions to “channel uncertainty through a conventional formatting of events”.<sup>46</sup> Individuals can, and do, interpret and question existing conventions and push, usually collectively, towards their amendment or the establishment of new ones. Conventions are used to “tame” uncertainty, by imposing frameworks on it. Successful coordination requires (most) agents to accept a certain behaviour as legitimate, based on a common mental construct. The convention school sees conventions as having a profound cognitive and motivational role for individuals, without excluding non-conventional behaviours such as the exercise of free will, choice, deliberation, imperfect information and irrationality. Stronger rules, such as laws, are in turn codified versions of certain key conventions: a recent example are the contemporary debates about same-sex marriage in different countries.

Conventions are, in turn, based on broader moral orders or “worlds of worth”:<sup>47</sup> distinct (ideal-typical) systems of principles, whose purpose is to guide social agents in resolving conflicts which arise among them. Worlds of worth provide a pre-made, relatively consistent vocabulary and an arsenal of justifications with which agents can legitimise their position, understand the opponents’ positions, resolve conflicts and achieve further social stability. Boltanski and Thévenot<sup>48</sup> describe several ideal types of coordination (each of which stems from a different world of worth): market, industrial, civic, domestic/traditional, inspired, fame. As these worlds are empirical and historically constructed. Later additions to the list include the con-

<sup>46</sup> Laurent THÉVENOT, “Convention School.” In: BECKERT, J. – ZAFIROVSKI, M. (eds.) *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*. London: Routledge 2006, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> The French term *cit * is translated as order, register, economy, polity or world of worth in different sources.

<sup>48</sup> BOLTANSKI – TH VENOT, *On Justification*.

nectionist/projective/network world of worth<sup>49</sup> and the green world,<sup>50</sup> and others are possible.

Another key term is "test of worth", which is a form of conflict among actors. Tests are more than just theoretical or political debates: they involve persons in their bodily existence, practices and materiality. A test can only be carried out if the conflicting actors refer to different worlds of worth. In these cases, the conflict may escalate, or alternatively various degrees of compromise may be reached through subtle displacements of existing worlds of worth, or through creating hybrid versions. For example, the notion of workers' rights is a compromise between the industrial and civic worlds.

The last key term is "critique", which is what "unmasks infringements of justice" in tests by "revealing the hidden forces that interfere with the test and exposing certain protagonists who, enjoying greater access to various resources, mobilize them unbeknownst to others, procuring an unwarranted advantage".<sup>51</sup> Critique is the translation of indignation into critical frameworks. Importantly, critique is always prompted by an emotional reaction to an injustice endured by oneself or others; but only at its second level (the "reflexive, theoretical and argumentative") is it possible to sustain ideological struggle.<sup>52</sup> Critique comes in two incompatible forms: "artistic", focusing on freedom and authenticity; and "social", focusing on equality, order, morality and justice. Most importantly, critique is not independent of capitalism as it shares some of its core features: artistic critique shares capitalism' individualism and social critique shares its propensity to organise and administer.

Indignation towards capitalism runs in several directions:<sup>53</sup> disenchantment in capitalism's inauthenticity grounded in the idea of the "irreducibility of persons whose potential (as opposed to action) cannot be confined to a final list of properties"; indignation towards oppression, grounded in a belief in the unacceptability of egoism, in turn based on the notion of common humanity; indignation against the resulting poverty and inequalities,

<sup>49</sup> BOLTANSKI – CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

<sup>50</sup> Laurent THÉVENOT – Michael MOODY – Claudette LAFAYE, "Forms of Valuing Nature: Arguments and Modes of Justification in French and American Environmental Disputes". In: LAMONT, M. – THÉVENOT, L. (eds.), *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 229–272.

<sup>51</sup> THÉVENOT – MOODY – LAFAYE, "Forms of Valuing Nature," p. 493.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> BOLTANSKI – CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 36, 491.

grounded in the unfairness of suffering, notably suffering caused by humans to humans; and indignation against the qualities which capitalism fosters, such as opportunism and egoism. But capitalism's multi-faceted nature is precisely what renders critique unstable, because the tensions between possible alternatives of the above four problems are impossible to sustain in one coherent framework. Despite the widespread indignation, there is no simple better alternative to capitalism. Critique of capitalism is inescapably incomplete because it cannot escape its confines, and incomplete critique is ineffective: it cannot yield change.

**Box 1: “Worlds of worth” in Boltanski and Thévenot’s  
“On Justification”**

**Market:** competition, interest, wealth, money (Adam Smith’s *The wealth of nations*)

**Industrial:** efficiency, effectiveness, performance, output (Saint Simon)

**Civic:** collective, representativeness, legality, officiality, unity through recognised common interest (Rousseau’s *“Social Contract”*)

**Domestic:** trust, personal exchange, tradition, loyalty, friendship, family (Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet)

**Fame:** opinion, glory, social recognition (Thomas Hobbes)

**Inspired:** creativeness, epiphany, faith (example: St Augustine’s *City of God*)

As discussed above, a lot of existing critique of academia tends to be either individualist or structuralist. While the origins of convention theory are also institutionalist and lie within institutional economics, in Boltanski and Chiapello’s treatment of “the new spirit of capitalism” it manages to link together methodological individualism and institutionalism, thus bridging both parts of the social-theoretical spectrum.

Convention theory and its concept of worlds of worth are especially useful for analysing major societal changes and thus applicable to the changes in academia. CT allows us to understand HE as an institution in flux sustained by a complex, dynamic configuration of social conventions and inhabited by real-life social actors with their own beliefs, dreams, goals and faults. It gives a vocabulary to talk about the shifts and fragmentations of conventions (and the justifications attached to them) which happen as the landscape of the academic labour market becomes increasingly international, marketised, unstable and precarious, uncovering the conventions (negotiated rules) that



sustain the system, without losing sight either of the large scale shifts in the economy, management, politics, values, purposes and practices of research, teaching and learning in higher education, or the micro-scale everyday interactions among actors in the field.

Having analysed a large body of managerial literature published in the 1990, Boltanski and Chiapello observed that NPM emerged as a result of the artistic critique of Western capitalism in the 1970s and 80s. Yet, paradoxically, this mutation of capitalism no longer possesses its predecessor's motivational force because it is no longer perceived as secure and just by its actors. The same has happened with academia in the past couple of decades as the progressive critique of the "ivory tower" as too rigid and inaccessible has, instead of liberating it from red tape and discrimination, led to the introduction of new public management which has made the system less just and less secure for most of its actors. This links back to the argument made in the "academic acceleration" literature discussed above: while this new world has generative potential, it is also prone to what Gill above called "bulimic" practices and fast disintegration, because its new mechanisms tend to lose their novelty and become embedded. The disjoint state of the "critical studies of academia" literature and its focus on emotions rather than structural change are thus entirely logical: as Boltanski and Chiapello observe, critique (initially) wanes when capitalism is in crisis, as "cadres" (wage-earners) experience increasingly the pervasive, systemic, atomising uncertainty which characterises contemporary academia.

By focusing on the moral structure of social life and the plurality of forms of justice, CT offers an alternative both to the rationality assumption made by methodological individualism, on the one hand, and the passive determinism of macrostructuralist approaches, such as path-dependence theory, on the other. It does not completely reject either model, but sees markets as only one of many possible form of conventional co-ordination, rather than the unique or most important form; and institutions not as rigid external entities, but as "embodied conventions": collective intentional objects inhabited by agents. In CT, actors are neither fully rational agents, nor institutional pawns; their rationality is not substantive but bounded, situated, and procedural, shaped by the circumstances and the restrictions imposed on them by the institutions in which those actors take part. CT looks simultaneously at individual and group actions, and at the effects of choice in cases when alternative conventions clash, or the steps via which new conventions develop. It helps conceptualise and disentangle the mechanics of the constant "upwards" and "downwards" translations between

policies and individuals, and offers a broader scope of analysis compared to institutional theories which mainly tackle larger formations. For these reasons the “new spirit of capitalism” framework is especially pertinent to the current dramatic worldwide transformation of academic structures, practices and values of knowledge production which affects also the content of knowledge and the lives and careers of academics and students.

What, then, is the “new spirit of academic capitalism” and how could we use it to understand and critique 21<sup>st</sup> century academia?

What we see in the academic world at the moment is similar to the two concurring phenomena which Boltanski and Chiapello identify in Europe more generally, namely: the waning of critiques of capitalism since the 1980s, despite its widely acknowledged shortcomings, and the increasing fatalism that accompanies this lack of critique. Capitalism is defined as the “imperative to unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means”.<sup>54</sup> In the academic field, following Bourdieu,<sup>55</sup> we can talk of academic capital, as well as other forms of capital (social, economic, cultural). Capitalist accumulation depends on the mobilization of a large class of cadres or wage-earners, and the “spirit of capitalism” is “the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism”.<sup>56</sup> To be accepted as a legitimate form of social organisation, capitalism needs to justify itself and to mobilise individuals to follow its rules. The authors draw on Weber’s concept of Beruf, “a religious vocation demanding fulfilment” which provided “psychological motivation” for engaging in capitalism.<sup>57</sup> Through a capitalist lens, academics are the cadres motivated by an ideology which justifies their engagement in academic capitalism. Seeing academic work as “labour of love” is thus a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it is what sustains motivation in the long term and allows this work to be carried out; but on the other hand, it creates the ground for academics’ self-exploitation.

The justification of capitalism as a worthy pursuit, however, cannot come from within, but must be backed up with external arguments and draw on external resources “inscribed”<sup>58</sup> in the relevant cultural context – in order to speak to the values and concerns of those it wants to involve. Boltanski and Chiapello show that the “management discourse, which aims

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Pierre BOURDIEU, “The Forms of Capital.” In: RICHARDSON, J. (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood 1986, pp. 241–258.

<sup>56</sup> BOLTANSKI – CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

to be formal and historical, general and local, which mixes general precepts with paradigmatic examples" is the main justificatory form in which "the spirit of capitalism is incorporated and received".<sup>59</sup> This discourse, they argue, is primarily directed at cadres, without whose support the capitalist enterprise cannot exist, but whose commitment to the enterprise is not given for granted and who, unlike blue-collar workers, can jeopardise the enterprise through passive resistance, reluctance or withdrawal from the labour market, or "undermine the capitalist order by criticising it from within".<sup>60</sup> Cadres are "simultaneously wage-earners and spokesmen for capitalism".<sup>61</sup>

To make commitment to it worthwhile, to be attractive, capitalism must [...] be presented to them in the form of activities, which, in comparison with alternative opportunities, can be characterised as "stimulating".<sup>62</sup>

That is, it must have room for autonomy meaning "self-realization" and "freedom of action".<sup>63</sup> In addition to the promise of autonomy, academic capitalism must promise security, meaning confidence about their future prospects.

Boltanski and Chiapello note capitalism's great ability to assimilate critique. Two types of relevant critique exist: social critique is linked with the history of the working-class movement and targets economic exploitation and alienation in the Marxist sense, while artistic critique originates from intellectual and artistic circles and focuses on capitalism's dehumanising effects. Both types of critique together are relevant to the question of how universities are run.

A convention-theoretical approach to understanding the changes in academia does have its limitations, but they do not invalidate it. Firstly, although convention theory does break away from the determinism of social structuralism, it does ultimately remain somewhat structuralist in a looser sense. By insisting on a "grammar" of social life – even if it is an elaborate and rich one, it retains, as Godechot rightly points out, a "deterministic epistemology".<sup>64</sup> This is both its strength and its weakness. Ironically, convention theory is in fact best suited for the thing it exposes so well: justifying

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Olivier GODECHOT, "On Justification: Book Review," [online]. Available at: <[http://olivier.godechot.free.fr/hopfichiers/Godechot\\_Review\\_Justification.pdf](http://olivier.godechot.free.fr/hopfichiers/Godechot_Review_Justification.pdf)> [cit. 1.9.2016].

why something has happened in the past through fitting it into a jigsaw of pre-manufactured and named elements (“worlds of worth”). It does allow updating, as demonstrated by the convincing addition of the “network/projective” world into the concise repertoire of worlds.<sup>65</sup> This addition improves the model but also raises the question whether, ultimately, it may ever be possible to explained radical societal innovation fully by fitting it into existing conceptual moulds. As for academic capitalism, it is a system which is in flux, developing rapidly, and is highly self-referential. While convention theory provides a well-developed set of tools for uncovering the hidden structures undergirding the flesh of academic marketisation, perhaps an even more radical break away from structuralism is required to compensate for the blind spots of convention-theoretical analyses.

Second, convention theory tends towards toward the idealistic and normative end of the theoretical spectrum. This creates the risk of focusing on what “should” be versus a scientific view of what “is”, losing sight of the importance of empirical inequalities of gender, age, race, class, disability, sexual orientation, etc. The analysis above inevitably remains locked within this frame. However, the issue at stake is a strongly moral one: the impact of academic marketisation on science and scientists is certainly not only a sociological but a social problem. Thus one can hardly imagine an entirely “objective” analysis to be at all possible. To go back to the classic argument which Max Weber makes in his essay “Science as a vocation”: a scientist’s motivation can never be fully objective and claiming otherwise would be a lie, but this fact must be recognised and harnessed both as a strength and a limitation underpinning scientific efforts. Hiding our subjectivity in the matter would not help. In fact, the unsubstantiated claim for objectivity is what lies at the centre of the alluring claims precisely of new public management theory and practice – which brought the current state of academia into being. We can recognise the risks inherent in both normativity and idealism, but perhaps we cannot escape them without committing even worse crimes.

### **The new spirit of academic capitalism: four brief examples**

***Example 1: status quo, no critique. The efficiency and entrepreneurship discourse: A “market-industrial world of academic worth” at the backbone of the “new spirit of academic capitalism”.***

<sup>65</sup> BOLTANSKI – CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. xv, 103–163.

The excerpt below is a typical example of the many invitations to “manage your own career” workshops regularly sent to faculty in a highly-ranked British university by its Staff Development Centre. It exemplifies the conglomerate of the “market” and the “industrial” world of worth. Its message is that, to be successful on the academic market, the academic person must become not only more efficient and productive, but also be able to demonstrate her efficiency in the relevant recognisable vocabulary “code”. Academics are increasingly encouraged to take an active managerial approach to their work, their career and their identity. The emphasis is on individual responsibility: take stock, take control, market themselves, quantify and quantise their working lives and careers, network assiduously and pragmatically, project a confident image, master the vocabulary of the neoliberal labour market. In short, academics must become more instrumental. These positively sounding goals are justifications for a far less benign battle between incompatible academic worlds of worth. Whether the feedback quoted at the end of the invitation is genuine or edited, is irrelevant, for its purpose as part of the invitation is to paint the picture of the ideal neoliberal subject who attends such courses with the goal of bettering her- or himself and fitting into the market-industrial world of worth.

### **Box 2: Managing your Academic/Research Career**

A one day programme that provides men and women in academia with a day of active reflection and discussion on a wide range of issues that face staff in the management of their careers. The programme provides an opportunity to examine existing skills, networks and preferences so that they can effectively progress their career. This programme is a collaborative programme developed by Vitae & UKRC which has been adapted for Warwick Research Active Staff.

Who is it for?

Research Active Staff (Research, Academic or Teaching terms & conditions)

The programme enables research active staff to:

- Assess their current capabilities and identify areas for personal development
- Understand how to market themselves through a CV
- Consider the work-life balance & how this can be achieved

- Consider the need for profile raising and reputation building
- Hold confident conversations around ambitions and goals
- Make new contacts and practice networking
- Set some personal goals

Please bring a copy of your academic cv and a 2 page resume/summary CV

**Feedback about the workshop from a previous delegate:**

“The “Managing your Academic / Research Career” course was excellent. [Name of lecturer] made us reconsider things we take completely for granted, even things as simple as the way we introduce ourselves, and the results were very revealing. The course helps researchers at all stages to take stock and take control of their own learning and development.”

***Example 2: “The True Joy in Mathematics”. Artistic Critique based on passion, creativity and authenticity in the “inspired-domestic world of academic worth”.***

The excerpt below is from the introduction of a university mathematics textbook which one of the respondents in my current research project about academic careers in mathematics recommended to me. It is formulated in the “inspired world of academic worth”. While it is not a direct critique, it is an implicit critique and represents the attitude of many professional academic mathematicians to their work. In this world science is pure knowledge and practicing it brings transcendental joy incommensurate to almost any other. The importance of, and fascination with, mathematics is so big that many mathematicians prefer to deal with their science rather than distract themselves with a direct critique of the academic system. But this is also a “domestic world of academic worth” in which students and teachers become intertwined in a quasi-familial network. It is the negative aspects of this domestic world (power, discipline, corruption, inefficiency, nepotism, and entrenched class, race and gender inequalities) against which NPM in the 1970s fought.

The true joy in mathematics, the true hook that compels mathematicians to devote their careers to the subject, comes from a sense of boundless wonder induced by the subject. There is transcendental beauty, there are deep and intriguing connections, there are surprises and rewards,

and there is play and creativity. Mathematics has very little to do with crunching numbers. Mathematics is a landscape of ideas and wonders. This book is for my students who have come to understand what I mean by this.<sup>66</sup>

**Example 3: *The Res-Sisters*.<sup>67</sup> Social critique of academia from a "domestic-civic world of academic worth".**

The Res-Sisters is a small group of UK-based early career female and feminist academics from different disciplines (including education, sociology and cultural studies) who presented a collaborative paper at the British Sociological Association's annual conference in 2016 based on a book chapter they wrote together<sup>68</sup>. Below is a reflection of one of the co-authors on the experience, grounded ("justified", in CT terms) in the language of a "domestic world of academic worth" (solidarity, community, friendship, family) but also a "civic world of academic worth" (collective, voice, open civic debate, democracy):

As a means of rejecting the rampant individualism of the neoliberal academy we were committed to ensuring that there was no one lead author, and this is something that we are particularly proud of. We all care deeply about our roles within Higher Education and we also care passionately about the wellbeing of one another, both within the Res-Sister collective and our colleagues within the field; encouraging conversations that build solidarity and support. With this in mind we encourage all Res-Sisters to share our experiences far and wide. [...Our presentation] prompted passionate discussion amongst the academics in the room, ranging from Pharmacy and Environmental Science through to Economics and History. Despite our differing intellectual backgrounds we all felt disillusionment with the neoliberal academy and the demands it places upon us (well, all bar the economist anyway!). It is so important that we talk about these things, and that we render problematic the common-sense of the neoliberal academy.

<sup>66</sup> James TANTON, "Mathematics Galore: The First Five Years of St. Mark's Institute of Mathematics." Washington, D.C.: Mathematical Association of America 2012.

<sup>67</sup> "The Res-Sisters," *op. cit.*

<sup>68</sup> The RES-SISTERS, "I'm an Early Career Feminist Academic: Get Me Out of Here?" Encountering and Resisting the Neoliberal Academy. In: THWAITES, R. – PRESSLAND, A. (eds.), *Being an Early Career Feminist Academic: Global Perspectives, Experiences and Challenges*. Palgrave Macmillan 2016.

***Example 4: A debate about PhD programmes in a British University: conflict, critique and compromise in service of efficiency (social critique resulting in a compromised “civic-industrial world of academic worth”)***

The third example below is on the surface an optimistic example of the “civic world of academic worth” in academia, of a conflict, or test, which has been (temporarily) resolved through open critique and discussion.

The formal period of registration for most PhD programmes in British universities is three (rarely four) calendar years. In the last decade, the pressure on PhD students to finish on time has increased greatly as universities try to streamline their “production” of PhD graduates and tighten the rules to avoid lengthy thesis writing. In 2016, the Board of graduate studies at one British University recently put forward a proposal to introduce penalties for late submission of postgraduate theses, including “a late submission fee, permanent withdrawal and compelled submission (even if unfinished)”. The proposal was debated and the postgraduate officer (representative of the Student Union responsible for postgraduate affairs) made a strong case against it, arguing that such penalties would not benefit the students and would instead be detrimental to students in vulnerable situations. The postgraduate officer put forward an alternative suggestion: that instead “the University should focus its energy on ensuring that all departments provide adequate support to students and seek best practice from departments with high submission rates”. As a result of the discussions, the Board of Graduate Studies decided: not to support the introduction of penalties or disincentives for students in relation to timely thesis submission; to seek out best practice in relation to securing high rates of submission within registration periods; that the Graduate School should identify reasons for late submission through qualitative data collection.”<sup>69</sup>

This successful civic debate is circumscribed within a rigid “industrial world of academic worth” framework which values above all efficiency, performance, value for money and output. The main goal of the conveyor belt university – timely submission – remains unchanged, but hopefully begins to be destabilised by the critique.

**Conclusion: Can scientists create generative critique of the “new spirit of academic capitalism” from within?**

<sup>69</sup> Source: Student Union officer’s official Facebook page, 2016 [online].



This article applied Convention Theory to the analysis of the marketisation, acceleration, internationalisation and precarisation of science, academia and higher education. Taking inspiration from Boltanski and Chiapello's concept of the new spirit of capitalism, the shorthand "new spirit of academic capitalism" was used as part of a conceptual toolbox for unpacking the worlds of worth, conventions and justifications which operate beneath the surface of the academic institution – and, ultimately, as a step towards for building generative critique of the changes in academia from within, so that academics can actively shape the future of the university, rather than remain discontented but passive bystanders. The "new spirit of academic capitalism" framework provides a vocabulary for understanding the move towards a lean business model of knowledge production in academia not as an isolated phenomenon, but as an integral part of the shifting moral, economic and political landscapes of today's global capitalism and knowledge society.

The examples aimed to illustrate the clash of co-existing values which causes shifts in the "academic worlds of worth," and unpack the vocabularies, justifications and practices employed in academic institutions. Both artistic and social critique come, on the one hand, from an "inspired" and a "domestic" world of worth position; and on the other hand, from a "civic" perspective. The critiques are grounded with a wide-spread disillusionment with the emphasis on efficiency, managerialism and value for money which become "dehumanising" as they take away human integrity, choice, freedom and passion for knowledge. The hybrid industrial-market world of academic worth has become more powerful than the ideal of knowledge it was supposed to serve.