Wanted: Autonomous Researcher (m/f)

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Instead of proposing an ideal research agenda for the coming decades, I think it would be more useful to talk about a desirable *space* for research. Over the past fifteen years, that space has undergone quite a transformation in Europe, with the Netherlands perhaps taking the lead. This goes for the liberal arts, the social sciences and the exact sciences, but as I have concerned myself only with the first two in the past twenty years, I will limit my comments to these fields.

It must have been around seven years ago – perhaps not coincidentally at the time when I moved from a Belgian to a Dutch university – when I noticed for the first time that some of my colleagues were panting. It is a symptom that will sometimes even evolve into a structural pathology, notably a light case of hysteria. Please don't get me wrong: I work with absolutely wonderfully sympathetic, kind and collegial people, many more than I ever knew in Belgium. I am not concerned here with personality traits. Perhaps it is a professional bias, but as a sociologist I am not really inclined to looking at individuals to find the causes of their pathologies. It should come as no surprise that I feel more at home studying social and cultural contexts when it comes to explaining phenomena. So, panting. Of course I am not referring to the physiological phenomenon of academics running a marathon, but to the slightly hysterical panting caused by being mentally out of breath. Why does this occur? First of all, there is the traditional tension within universities between the exact sciences, on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences, on the other. Are the latter two really sciences? Well, no – at least not if we apply the criteria of the former, which is still, or again, being done at many universities. However, the type of panting this causes is an old vexation from way before my time. More recently, the lamenting is about the decrease in amount of time available for doing research. It's still there – theoretically – but in everyday practice it is absorbed by educational and administrative tasks. At the same time, research output is still expected, but the required work necessarily shifts to spare time, with research acquiring the status of a refined hobby. This, too, leads to much sighing among colleagues.

However, the worst cases of shortness of breath are found among the most exemplary of academics. Their panting is truly caused by mental running. In the hope of acquiring research grants and thus time to study, they meticulously follow the agendas of research foundations, government institutions and other principal players. They churn out grant applications one after another, and what's more, exchange one research theme for another with amazing swiftness. Yesterday it was cultural diversity, art education, social cohesion and community art; today it is the creative industry, creative entrepreneurship and the creative city, although these, in turn, are now about to be pushed aside by the new buzzword of “sustainability”. These noble and undoubtedly socially highly relevant themes succeed one another at a maddening pace, and, in the hope of scoring some sort of subsidy, scholars, like mental flex workers, make their bids for yet another freshly invented research programme. Policymakers come up with one relevant subject after another, while

the NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, which funds the research of more than 5,000 scientists), like other research foundations, has little choice but to follow suit. Today it is all about “top sectors”. What will tomorrow's hype be? And the universities? They are only all too eager to join in for the sake of their dynamic image. Only the people who bring in the money are being promoted, and nowadays professorships can be bought with considerable sums obtained from the NWO or from third parties, preferably from both. When a chair loses its “triple-A rating” because there aren't enough paying students or because research budgets dwindle, very little time is lost these days in letting someone else have a go at it. There are very few academics who can still determine their own research agenda, let alone a sustainable one, among such frantic circumstances. The expertise of the profession, domain or discipline is becoming increasingly irrelevant to policy fads, which, on top of that, have begun more and more blatantly to serve ideological agendas – a phenomenon that the opportunistic scientist is better off just totally ignoring, as a matter of self-preservation and if he or she wants to have any chance at all.

Therefore, before discussing a research agenda for the future, I think it is more urgent at this time to look for spaces where we can stop panting *[www.onlineopen.org/communising-or-immunising-the-humanities]*. Places where autonomous researchers – out of passion for and obsession with their profession or discipline – can set their own agenda and be the masters of their own time. “Time to dig deep", as Richard Sennett would say. Time for fundamental scientific research, but also space to arrive at truly innovative insights. Immanuel Kant reportedly took more than twenty years to write his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Rudolf Diesel committed suicide out of desperation because no one at the time appreciated the social or economic relevance of his engine. Society had it wrong then, just like today's set of policymakers, technocrats and bureaucrats are completely wrong in thinking that their policies will lead to innovative and creative research results. Short-term thinking and emphasis on profitability will at most lead to a few hypes, which are often generated by policymakers themselves in order to legitimise their spending of public money. Truly relevant scientific innovation is not produced from behind the sterile desks of policymakers, but by hordes of researchers who can think and experiment and are allowed to do so in total freedom. This type of wild bunch operates on the risky edge of reality and fiction, in a liminal zone that preprogrammed research agendas will not, and dare not, foresee. Both the university, and the NWO, once the traditional guardian of that autonomous research space, have squandered their authority. The NWO is also panting, verging on hysteria. There is a good chance, therefore, that autonomous researchers must be found elsewhere. And the challenge to future research? That would be active research, a scientific practice that searches for – and simultaneously *creates* – the free space both within and outside the universities. To what end? To guarantee truly socially relevant research tomorrow.

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