Micro-Managerialism or the Ambivalent Measures of Political Success

Johan Frederik Hartle

Essay – June 15, 2015

The protest movement in and around the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has – in changing waves of conjuncture – been active for more than half a year now. It has produced some beautiful encounters between staff members and students, and has led to various learning and politicisation processes that, for a long time, seemed unthinkable. Suddenly things could be put on the agenda that had been impossible to discuss in times of atomised and competitive working relations, on the one hand, and endless formalised administrative meetings, on the other.

It was the especially festive and sociable – but also very political and intellectual – atmosphere in the occupied (or, rightly, re-appropriated) Maagdenhuis that left all of the protesters with a joyful experience of revolt. This experience lingers despite the disproportionate use of violence by the police against the protesters during the Maagdenhuis eviction process. The struggle remains a beautiful event, which means the movement was a success in and of itself – if only for a short moment in time.

Some of the original motivation for this protest include the student and staff's refusal to being excessively governed and administered, the ever expanding student and staff workloads, and decrying the politics of de-solidarisation (or divide et impera), which was used to institute cutbacks predominantly in the humanities. One of the key targets of the movement's criticism were outbursts of administrative arbitrariness, of top-down governance and centralisation – in other words, managerialism.

The situation finally calmed down only several weeks later, after the occupiers had been evicted from the Maagdenhuis on April 11 and staff members and students mounted a powerful solidarity demonstration on April 13. The sequence of escalating events from the early modest student protests in the Humanities department to the occupation of the Bungehuis and the re-appropriation of the Maagdenhuis (with the emergence of new organisational units such as the Humanities Rally, De Nieuwe Universiteit, and Rethink UvA) has led to a significant lull in activities as well as the dubious success of even more bureaucratic integration.

One of the regular complaints about the university's administrative board (College van Bestuur or CvB) was its inability or unwillingness to listen to students and staff demands. Somewhat paradoxically, this managerial incapacity (coupled with some of the CvB's stupid strategic miscalculations – such as the excessively violent Maagdenhuis eviction) proved valuable to the movement itself, however. These actions allowed the movement to focus on itself, its own needs and interests, its own networks and forms of political articulation that culminated in the protest movement's decisive moment.

Activities have died down as the university's administration officials as well as the Dutch parliament have indeed expressed a desire to listen to the demands. They're all listening

so intently it's almost scary with the protesters establishing numerous working groups and university and faculty representatives instituting literally dozens of commissions. Ten commissions on the Humanities faculty level alone have been formed to place the major issues on the agenda. Moreover, all of the organisations involved in the protests were invited to participate.

Two major commissions in particular were established on the university level to monitor the CvB's general policies. These commissions seem promising as they attempt to advocate for more structural changes in the financialisation and bureaucratisation of academia. These commissions seem to have succeeded in creating a broader base for the movement's key demands – greater democratic participation and control. These new commissions represent an immense opportunity in that they may help keep the more perverse forms of managerial influence in check.

Not unlike the ideology of participation in general (as long as it remains within pre-determined societal and institutional boundaries) their success may, however, prove to be both ambivalent and ironic. The new working groups and commissions have already accumulated massive amounts of administrative tasks and duties. This is, of course, ironic, since they were established to combat the proliferation of university bureaucracy.

There are more reasons why the results of these commissions may prove ambivalent: not only have the workloads of teaching staff continued to increase but temporary contracts are no longer being extended (in other words: colleagues are being laid off) while the commissions were still in their infancy. The new – and now somewhat participatory – administrative units require even larger numbers of employees engaged in administrative duties. Meanwhile, the new, smaller commissions do not have the capacity to address the fundamental structures that have led to so much misery among both students and staff.

The new participatory managerialism that is supposed to address, amongst other topics, financial inequities remains embedded within the university's established structure – a university that is in the choke-hold of bank loans, and in part administered by financial and real estate managers. And by their very existence the new commissions keep increasing the administrative task load for academic staff (at a university where administrative staff numbers have been growing for decades). The new forms of micro-managerialism, involving even more people in an ever-growing process of administration and self-administration are dangerously close to perfecting and refining control measures at contemporary universities as opposed to actually breaking with these measures.

These suspicions are historically and theoretically rooted in the political theories of Italian workerism and by the advent of post-fordism in the aftermath of the political struggles of the 1960s. The fundamental conviction of the Italian workerists was (if you will) an ontological belief that all paradigmatic changes in the strategies and techniques of capital rule and bureaucratic organisation are just reactions to prior labour struggles. Workers' struggles were, in other words, seen as the driving force of major institutional changes. By contrast, capital and bureaucratic rule were regarded as merely reactive (and reactionary) and parasitic moments in the evolving dynamics of history.

While this fundamental hypothesis originally stemmed from a narrow analysis of living labour struggles it has been broadly (and famously) applied to comprehend the dynamics of a broad spectrum of political struggles, including the expanding field of immaterial labour under contemporary capitalist conditions. This workerist belief has always been simultaneously deeply optimistic and deeply pessimistic. It was optimistic to the extent that it ontologically prioritised the struggles of living labour, declaring it as the driving force of historical change. It was deeply pessimistic, however, in its assumption that the reactive capacity of capital would always find ways to transform even the most progressive struggles into new mechanisms of control and domination. The structural link

between integration and subsumption clarifies the workerist argument.

If this viewpoint has ever made sense it was in its interpretation of the advent of new managerial paradigms of deregulation, flexibility, and individual entrepreneurialism since the 1970s. This is because the pathway to post-fordist hell was (partly) paved with good intentions. Besides shifts in the composition of the dominant alliances (the increasing influence of financial capital) and of external factors (the oil crisis), these developments were also reactions to the manifest forms of critique, which, articulated by militant students and workers, addressed the patronising and patriarchal, centralist and monopolised forms of social and economic regulations in the fordist paradigm. One of the main effects of this transition was the transition from centralised fordist bureaucracy to post-fordist managerialism. This new paradigm of domination was successively imposed on all social entities, which became more and more obliged to interpret their own capacities in terms of entrepreneurial strategies. This allowed the ruling elites to sell the major strategies of expanded capitalisation as a success in the unfolding of individual freedom, which, in some ways it was.

Of course, patriarchal, paternalist, static and centralist forms of rule were easy targets for those who offered emancipatory criticism. But fordist nostalgia would be an absurd strategy to choose, and yet, the strictly regulated labour market of fordist capitalism with its (alienating) separation of work and leisure also allowed us to imagine a world beyond labour – and capital. Centralised paternalism also allowed (some people) to keep managerial thinking at (at least some!) distance by delegating it: Not everyone had to be a bureaucrat. The positive thing about the overly regulated, static and statist fordist inside was thus that it had an outside, as well.

These kinds of developments in historical protests are some of the reasons why protests should not be celebrated too early. Like earlier struggles that stopped short of institutional integration, these protests may also end up contributing to developments that seem more promising than they actually end up being. The current dystopian narrative of the situation at the UvA reads like this: Participation and integration may end up simply being a means to refining and perfecting the established managerialism, internalising it further, rather than curbing it. This is partly as a result of new forms of expanded administrative rule that can actually claim to be moral and democratic, which can paint any critic of excessive administrative tasks as a reactionary. During times of democratic participation a lack of administrative eagerness can create a political stigma: Everyone who doesn't play along and doesn't feel inspired to accept new administrative tasks can easily appear as unfaithful to the protest movement itself.

The suspicion that the new "culture of dialogue" will end up silencing and appropriating the protests – and, in a worst case scenario – actually introducing new forms of micro-managerialism is fuelled by two aspects of the UvA protests themselves. Firstly, one should be aware of the fact that six months of protests have not reduced the workload of a single university employee. No classes were ever actually cancelled and the idea of a university-wide strike was quickly renounced. The re-appropriated Maagdenhuis certainly provided space to a wide range of intellectual activities such as classes, lectures, etc. But in the pre-existing structure, regulated labour was never really challenged, in fact, it was only supplemented with an extra program on top of everything else. With the end of the strongest waves of protests, a space of unregulated, or at least radically less regulated intellectual labour seems to be far beyond reach. The Maagdenhuis has fallen while the general workload has not been decreased. In fact, even worse: The new administrative structures, with all of their emphasis on participation may eventually lead to extended and ever-more binding rules and regulations.

Secondly, the UvA protests have not sufficiently addressed the constitutive ideology of the

homo academicus itself. Few professional groups identify as strongly with the their institutional apparatuses as academics do. Academics remain proud of their profession and are always seeking to become even more academic (smart, contribute intellectually to society's well-being and develop critical potentials), which would not appear to be a problem. But the social status function of being an academic should not be conflated with fundamental democratic virtues. In fact academics often have to defend academic virtues against the constraints of the very institution, which rarely represents them adequately and in full.

The UvA protests have often been forcefully articulated in the (at best, defensive) terms of humanist ideology. In the early stages of the protests, the slogan "I am Human. I am the Humanities" played a central role, suggesting that academic humanism grants a particularly valuable form of access to what it means to be human. In the actual confrontations with the police, the students and staff members tried to emphasise their status as decent academics rather than the usual political riffraff. This even evolved into the official "toga-strategy" at the demonstration as a response to the April 11 Maagdenhuis eviction process as if it was essential to prove one's class status to legitimise their democratic agency.

In terms of democratic standards, much has worsened in the arts, but there may be one visible advantage: The arts have been accepted by a broad cross-section of practitioners (who work in the context of institutional critique, new institutionalism, etc.) as a valid social institution with a set of ideological rules just like any other social institution. Last but not least, this has led to various critiques of the ideology of (in this case, artistic) participation.

The current academic protest movement should and can learn from these developments and can avoid the naivety associated with the positive notions of institutional integration. The aim should not be to increase the "participatory" identification with current institutional conditions. This would, on the one hand, merely lead to a repetition of the arrogance of insisting on social status, which, in turn, is strategically even more likely doomed to fail. In this sense, institutional distance is actually a necessary condition for a more sincere and sustainable creation of broader political alliances, which could foster alternatives to the current choke hold of austerity measures and liberal-conservative policies. On the other hand, an over-identification with the academic apparatus will certainly increase the threat of increased micro-managerialism, and will, in turn, only further refine and perfect the current managerial nature of our academic institutions. In other words, if one's somewhat contingent institutional status ('academic') also bestows a title of honour onto the recipients, there seem to be little reasons to complain about this institution's tendencies to over-integration.

It is for all these reasons that the gesture of refusal will remain crucial to the future success of the protest movement. And its success has been, to a large extent, an aesthetic success as well. We should also point out that there is no single aspect of the protests' beauty, of their spontaneity and their surprising forms of action and solidarity that could ever be nurtured in the dark hallways leading to the various commission meetings.

Editorial Common Knowledge *[www.onlineopen.org/common-knowledge]*

Johan Frederik Hartle teaches philosophy of art and culture at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). His research deals with institutional theories of art, the aesthetico-political and the heritage of Marxism. He is currently working on a book about the beauty of leftist politics.

Crosslinks

Common Knowledge: www.onlineopen.org/common-knowledge

Tags

Activism, Capitalism, Democracy