Reflections on Academia from a Perspective of Time(s)

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"Academia on Sale" [1] includes addressing managerialism, the decline of autonomy and the deterioration of the organisational climate, as well as how to maintain commitment and engagement, love for teaching, and how to revive our enthusiasm, maintain solidarity among the disciplines, and strive for a socially and academically sustainable context in universities. Performance pressure is high; many of us suffer from the stress of overwork and, at the same time, we "can't get no satisfaction".

In September 2013, Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis came to VU University, to address the university's leaders (CvB and deans). To cite from their book *Moral Blindness*, in particular, chapter 4: "Consuming University", which deals with system thinking and the increase in bureaucratic measures – in short, the university as a "consumerist" and market-driven institution, or as "cookie factory" [2] as VU staff and students have termed the process, a factory or institution that sells students as products and treats staff as machines. Bauman and Donskis argue that "A consumerist attitude may lubricate the wheels of the economy, [but] it sprinkles sand into the bearings of morality" (2013: 150). Of course, this is meant as a warning to universities that are supposed to produce "useful" knowledge as well as the graduates who will promote and utilise it – and put it "up for sale" as soon as new trends break. But it is also an explanation for why university staff and management remain compliant in the current consumerist culture: consumerism by its very character serves as a drug, preventing us from taking action via its ability to seduce us into compliance.

Meanwhile, Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Not for Profit* (2010) argues along similar lines, stating that the humanities' purpose to promote reflection, critical thinking, creativity and an interest in what cannot be predicted (nor, measured) must be pruned and curbed in a society that requires quantification as proof (of the benefits, the "truth") and ultimately serves the bureaucracy of the sciences and academic life.

Are we indeed facing the "end of the university" as Donskis has warned in his lecture to the rather stunned VU managerial staff? In response, I would like to propose an additional perspective on academia, a "timescape" view (cf. Adam 1998, Sabelis 2002) that aids in criticising the current neoliberal climate, or rather, the dominance of efficiency-driven managerial cultures. I would like to introduce the elements of a time perspective, followed by some reflections on "*Bildung*", education, and concluding with some observations by colleagues who have researched the increasing time pressure and desperation of academics in the context of growing workloads and shifting temporalities.

Clock time and beyond

Let's look at what we mean by the term "clock time paradox": while a timescape view is encompassing and "big" (cf. Adam, 1998), we tend to focus on clock-time only in our daily lives and actions, and consider it the most important in our core understanding and our core measure of time. As Paula Baron (2014) observes, Western time is limited to clock time as a result of the developments of industrialisation – and as we may add, further trimmed under neoliberal conditions. We can say that, in general, managerial time is a variation of clock time rationality: seemingly linear, often geared to relatively short-term outcomes and dismissing possible future effects – e.g., living (in) the present. It narrows down, it helps increase the pressure put on people and, at the same time, it is important (as well as "big") in that it prevents us from looking beyond to other more encompassing (and also culturally diverse) modes of time and temporality. We thus lose sight of broader time scales, different cultural norms regarding time, and timescapes (encompassing modes of time and their interrelations, (cf. Adam 1998) as a result of clock time's dominance. It is important to bear in mind that the clock time paradox influences how we reflect on current developments in higher education. Maybe some of us have an influence on our own working conditions in the future, especially in terms of the time = money mantra. My notion is to pursue the question of why there is currently such a lack of interest by university leaders in reflecting on the time spent on learning, education, future conditions, and how knowledge should be developed. In other words, what knowledge, how is it obtained and for what purposes? Therefore, let's turn to times spent on learning and education in the personal or familiar context. This will be followed by observation on how the university and higher education define and "use" time.

Bildung

We can consider the core task of universities as "the education of students on to an academic level". For me, this definition of education is best expressed in the German word "*Bildung*", which is an activity engaged in, through and with time. To reiterate: the relationship between learning, reflecting, learning certain ways of thinking, and especially coming up with new questions. *Bildung* (there is no satisfactory direct translation; it derives from a "romantic" ideal, a middle-class appeal for emancipation via education, see, e.g., Oelkers 1999). *Bildung* covers education, but it is a far broader concept. A polite or civil (*gebildet*) person may have had a good education, or a great deal of education, but this is not always necessary. At least not in the sense of school or university education. Education (*Bildung*) takes time, and provides time (in terms of enabling a broader horizon of insights for the proper assessment, analysis and enacting of knowledge), as we have all known in one sense or another.

A particular issue regarding education or *Bildung* is that it has a specific relationship to past, present and future. Education prepares for a future context, and it enables one to envision and plan, or avoid various futures through the accumulation of knowledge. A specific aspect to remember here is that both the content and the learning systems derive from past experience ("what worked well"), but are geared towards the future. Thus, a crucial element in educational systems is that we use the past to provide for the future while we produce the future in our present. We may wonder if and how this works in its present form / s, as well as in the contemporary forms being promoted via neoliberal assumptions of "usefulness". The concept of *Eigenzeiten*, or "proper times" (Nowotny 1992) is important here. It refers to the inherent (system) times necessary to "keep things going". In other words, how children and adults "need different amounts of time" for various tasks, including education and learning activities. It also refers to how there "is a time for everything", with different times of day, week, or year, considered better for various activities. There are also different time scales, or collections of *Eigenzeiten* in relation to each other, which means that it takes different amounts of time to learn how to read, to

learn to reflect, to learn craft skills, or to develop a "critical attitude". In nature, some time-scales are pretty much fixed, such as heart rate, the maturing process of different animals, the life expectancies of various species, etc. But there is also some flexibility or resilience that allows one to cope with unexpected changes in a system. Time compression is only possible if rhythmicity is acknowledged, if there is room for variation, for a periodic "free flow" and, at other times, for pressure (Sabelis 2002).

Because everyone has his or her own personal rhythms, educational systems will enable learning for some, while hindering it for others (e.g., morning and evening people). We are all aware of our personal rhythms that often turn out to be at odds with the social rhythms required of us by society. On the one hand, we choose to participate in societal activities that we like or need, on the other hand, social activities create a necessary evil – such as obligations or "culturally defined times", among other things. Nothing wrong with deadlines and schedules, until one's slow pace becomes a problem or acceleration leads to stress (Rosa 2003). In these types of cases, we end up suddenly having to take a "time out" so we can check to see what is going on and what needs to be changed to prevent inefficiency or a burnout. How time perception is learned is best observed with children, who sometimes combine time elements in unexpected ways. When she was four, my daughter once commented, "Mum, you have to buy time", referring to the fact that I had to put money in the parking meter. Indeed, as small children learn about time, they often make us aware of the tensions involved in how we use time in our daily lives.

Education as learning, developing, forming, preparing, sustaining, building and combining essential elements of survival, knowledge, and then combining those elements in useful ways in specific situations – education as a way to open us up to certain areas while also focussing on others – enables or hinders us in our goals based on particular physical, psychological and systematic conditions present. In other words, according to one's need as related to context, which allows us to see how *Eigenzeiten* as the various times that comprise the total of our interrelated temporalities are threatened or how they build a reliant framework for action and preparation. This is manifested not only in how children learn (in the broadest sense), but also how adults use a multitude of strategies and ways that they combine in sometimes very complex ways – to produce patterns that help to make sense of our lives and provide insight for others. Learning deals with our own personal survival and maintenance, as well as society's.

Academic Times

Colleagues Sue Clegg (2010), Helena Ylijoki (2013), Paula Baron (2014) study how time is utilised by academics in contemporary university contexts. Clegg demonstrates how the time as used by academics acquires short-term characteristics aimed to stimulate ever faster cycles of academic production, both in teaching (students) and in research pursuits (journal articles). This assumes that there is a market for knowledge – and this market obviously demands more or less direct "use" of its investment. Academic knowledge production as a goal in itself, that generates profits entails a short-term orientation by its very nature. What about sustainable, long / er term knowledge that includes both past and future issues?

Ylijoki (2013) has identified another temporal trait: one of the consequences of marketisation and McDonaldisation (Parker 1995) is that "we first want the admin out of the way before we can finally turn to our core business". But as administrative duties increase, academics end up working ever longer hours, which leads to the conclusion that universities tend to increasingly exploit staff engagement. Administrative personnel (supporting staff) often get annoyed when "academics take their time". But just one look at the amount of time one spends on emails or journals makes it fairly apparent that 24 / 7 has been the norm for a long time now and that "smart working" is nothing new. Support staff however, are also under pressure via project obligations involving output, for example.

The rise of different temporal demands is one of the reasons why it has taken so long for the two groups to join together to protest against mounting institutional pressures.

Paula Baron argues how academics use time – in keeping with the *Bildung* concept – should be task-oriented, which is actually a craft and crafts require various time dimensions (contrary to the fragmented, industrial image of production). Our head-and-hand-work to produce academic quality requires a lot of time in order to acquire the proper skills, to develop programs, to teach, to study and to produce outstanding research. It takes different amounts of time to produce our products, different levels of intensity and product quality, to create a valuable, transferable entity. This requirement cannot be met by is the present three-year PhD programs for ever younger students; it is counter-productive for the annual demands involving journal production and it undermines the rhetoric of institutional brochures that tout their lofty mission statements of "excellence".

Conclusion

The acceleration and commercialisation of the academic industry lead to increased anxiety, and render academics cautious, while consuming their time to the point that they believe their work to be the only *zeitgeber* in their lives. During my visit to Kaunas University last October, colleagues would approach me after my lecture on academic time to tell me how accurately I had described their situation and it was only then that I fully comprehended how individualisation works: it took a fairly simple message to realise that the pressures of time we feel should not be an individual responsibility. Time pressure serves two masters: on the one hand, coupled with individualisation it is characterised as an individual shortcoming (e.g., via output pressure and the predominance of research over teaching). While, on the other hand, it leads to the phenomenon of people "running on the spot", with no time to reflect on what is actually going on, let alone take collective action against the increased pressures. And this is exactly the message that lies at the foundation of Bauman and Donskis's (2013: 96-97) message: be careful not to lose your sense of morality because living a life of fear and forced compliance as a result of a lack of (broad) knowledge and less and less time, results in increases in ignorance, impotence and humiliation. It is in this situation that we lose our ability to comprehend a broadened time horizon and maintain our ability to use our time effectively, not in an economic sense, but as a measure of human proficiency.

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Footnotes

1. “Academia on sale” is an oft-repeated slogan in Dutch news media. As a one-liner, it goes back to before 2011, with increased usage more recently, when the SP (Socialist Party, NL) took it as its motto to address recent developments at Dutch Universities. 2011: www.sciencepalooza.nl; 2012: www.nos.nl 2015: www.sp.nl.
2. The university as a ‘cookie factory’ was the ironic slogan of students and staff at VU University, Amsterdam during their protests since about 2013.

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