

## ON WORK AND PEACE

I had a dream that times had changed and it became unacceptable and even unthinkable to treat work the way it is being treated today, just like slavery had become unacceptable, just like treating children as objects is now regarded as depraved and indefensible. In my dream many of today's "effective leaders" went down the same way in social memory of our posterity as has now become the fate of Johnny Savile.

It was literally a dream, but I awoke with a strong feeling of having been present in a future collective state of mind. No, it is not okay to abuse children. It is not okay to employ slavery. And it is not okay to manage people in the starkly depersonalized, brutally instrumental way that is today's hallmark of "human researches management".

Take, for instance, the professional group I know best, as I have been one of its members for now almost 30 years in different countries – the academics. This group has, during this time, been subjected to a number of "reforms" and attempts at "more effective" management. It has all been explained as a social and economic necessity and, of course, an improvement. But is it really? The Swedish sociologist Stefan Svallfors (2012) soberly and rightly points out that not once have we been consulted, asked, what work conditions are good for us. These are not so much reforms, as attempts at external control. They prove that we are not trusted to do our job – something we both know how to and care about doing well. In a book dedicated to the future of higher education, together with Michał Izak and Michał Zawadzki, we say:

*For the past 25 to 30 years now we have been defined externally by a business, often perceiving us as a more or less unreasonable curiosity, and by an administration that is suspicious towards us. Both have been busying themselves to constrain that which should not be constrained, "make transparent" that which cannot possibly remain other than obscure, the darkroom of emerging thought, schedule what is beyond linear time. Creative work is a mystery. Yes, there may be attempts to deceive and misuse academia by crooks and unserious practitioners. But these can best be hindered and prevented by collegial effort from the inside of the profession (2017: 333).*

And it is this collegial effort that always has been making it possible for us to do our job. It has been far from ideal most of the time: excluding, misogynist, racist and classist but we should have been given the possibility to struggle against all these failings, not lined up against a managerialist wall. What used to be a profession based on passion and dedication, not so much a job even but a calling, is now an occupation as alienated – or perhaps more – than any other in the neoliberal labour market, which Peter Fleming (2017) pertinently likens to a labour camp. Academics suffer, have all kinds of so called mental health problems (on such a mass scale this should be, surely, recognized for what it is? not problems of the individuals' health but the condition of the community). If you think the fate of academics is peanuts compared with the horrendous wars and deprivation of our times, then think again. Yes, the wars and misery are the utmost human tragedy, but the persistence and omnipresence of work alienation and dehumanized management is the root of many ills, such as demoralization, hopelessness; it is why accidents such as the Grenfell fire are so likely to occur and why there does not seem to be a ready to adopt viable alternative for policy and the economy.

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The latter should be our job, this is for this reason why, ultimately, social sciences exist: to think further, holistically, systemically and critically and bring forward new ideas that the other sectors cannot produce. And alienating management is, in itself, a serious abuse, especially when practiced on creative people. The best of us – and we are many – feel seriously and profoundly invaded and hurt by this approach. One day it may become recognized as a kind of mental rape. Creative people are like children in that we often take in everything, have very weak defences, and feel invaded by guilt and overpowering shame for things that are being done against us. This is not individual but systemic, the institutions promote this kind of behaviour, which I know very well from my experience in UK academia: genuine experience and creativity are being punished and sometimes spectacularly suppressed while bullies and people with serious ethical issues are being promoted to even higher managerial positions and professional ones, and as steeply as from lecturer on probation to professor in one year's time. The institutional support for such behaviour not only makes bullying and mental rape possible, likely even, but makes a norm out of them, which everyone believes they have to either emulate or accept as given and correct.

One day we will wake up from the nightmare called the neoliberal work ethics and may we then feel wiser, but may we also tremble. The horrors we do with full institutional support are precisely the ones that we, social scientists, are here to forewarn about – not in order to produce “reffable” papers no one reads or “draw in” funding for things we often could do better and more effectively without the preposterously Byzantine granting system.

The Swedes, who are now seeking to reclaim their academia, have a word which should become the new “hygge” in each and every workplace around the world, and especially in creative professions such as academia: *arbetsro*. The peace of work. Lets' end the war on work and fly the flags of peace.



## References

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