

Filipa Machado Rodrigues¹

¹ Universidade Católica Portuguesa, CADOS, Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Health, Lisbon, Portugal

email: fmrodrigues@ucp.pt

The Human face of science: what are people (in academia) for?

According to the term coined by Stefan Collini (2012)¹, the dimension of research that supports up-to-date, innovative, and creative teaching action in universities can be cataloged by the *Edspeak buzzwords*, that is: “competitive, ground-breaking, cutting-edge, relatable, applicable, impactful, transferable, research cluster grant-winning, profit-generating, and easily packaged for media coverage”.

In fact, academia did not escape neoliberal reform trends, starting to operate according to market mechanisms and principles of economic rationality (Vicente & Stoleroff, 2016)².

The effects of corporatization on scholarship are advancing at full speed, alongside the responsibilities linked to teaching and mentoring, with practices to encourage scientific production recognized in the rankings and ratings of scientific journals. Monetary prizes for authors with annual compliance with publication rates are part of the reward system.

Scientific production has a high impact on teachers’ merit assessment and effect on career progression, by their involvement (or not) in national and international projects that require more and more funding. All this along with all the bureaucratic work and academic responsibilities.

And that is fine. It is not possible to be a good scholar without being a researcher. But, without time, in the frenzy of multiple projects and publication of papers, what seems to be urgent does not always reflect a significant impact on the scientific community and society. But if the potential impact of projects were assessed a priori in academia, perhaps professionals could be more selective and focused on the quality of research, to the detriment of its quantity.

But unfortunately, the Academy seems to be hostage to predatory practices that often legitimize environments of competition between professionals from the same institution, opening space either for the idolatry of the researcher’s “ego”, or for the ecstasy of individual performance as the shortest path to what was considered the meritocratic competition at the Academy.

At what cost? The corporate machine operates successfully and public management in the Academy has punitive resources, such as professors’ assessment, for example. But Academia itself is also pressed under the evaluation action of governmental entities to guarantee the

¹ Collini, Stefan. *English Past: Essays in Culture and History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. – *What Are Universities For?* London: Penguin, 2012.

² Stoleroff, A. & Vicente, M. (2014), “Avaliação do desempenho em tempos de austeridade”, VIII Congresso Português de Sociologia, Évora, Associação Portuguesa de Sociologia

quality of higher education, through the accreditation of institutions and their study cycles, with consequent, recognition, and funding, which one way or another, impacts the flow of new candidates to join the institutions and its short-term stability.

Deadlines are always unavoidable and being slow just doesn't fit the system.

Let's wrap this sense of urgency in an institutional atmosphere label of "incentive mechanisms" accompanied by the call for personal dedication and pride in the work of the academic community: we have a scenario of a "culture of speed" (Berg & Seeber, 2016)³. That scenario will deeply affect the climate of interpersonal relationships in institutions developing a harsh climate that is not conducive to collaborative projects between scholars, so rich in their interdisciplinarity, when they happen.

The so-called "holding environment" is now something of the old guard in some universities, formerly academic communities, where knowledge was produced and transmitted, in which merit was based on erudition, academic leadership and managed by collegiate power (Deem, 1998)⁴.

The Academia of the 21st century is aware of its weaknesses but does not recognize the dangers of a precariousness that pushes toward the instrumentalization of the Other to fulfill individual production indexes, to the trampling of the Ethics of Time, of "time sickness" (Honoré, 2004)⁵, for the growing apathy in the face of superhuman work demands and workload fragmentation.

One of the most harmful side effects that affects professionals at the heart of their pro-activeness contribution to a healthy academic culture relies in their ability to be creative. In part, it is about how to resist to one's inner bully (Rettig, 2011)⁶ and overcome the repression of your innovative and creative thoughts, the foundations of teaching activity and scientific research. As Mainemelis (2001)⁷ says:

"What usually kills or blocks one's creativity is lack of courage to explore novel or countercultural ideas, paralyzing anxiety about one's performance, and premature rejection of one's insights as inadequate or not worthy of further elaboration."

Between not being worth the risk of personal exposure and risking seeing intellectual property being taken to serve other's promotion purposes, hopelessness and apathy is often the result. Between the shame of not being good enough and the frustration of expressing ideas that are unscrupulously appropriated by others, there is no easy choice. Except that inner bully anxiety is not a choice, it is a condition that gradually deteriorates the psyche and diminishes the individual's potential - his flourishing possibilities as a professional in academic institutions.

³ Berg, M., & Seeber, B. K. (2016). *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*. University of Toronto Press.

⁴ Deem, R.; Hillyard, S. & Reed, M. (2007), *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism. The Changing Management of UK Universities*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

⁵ Honoré, C. *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed*. Toronto: Vintage, 2004.

⁶ Rettig, H. *The Seven Secrets of the Prolific: The Definitive Guide to Overcoming Procrastination, Perfectionism, and Writer's Block*. 2011.

⁷ Mainemelis, C. "When the Muse Takes It All: A Model for the Experience of Timelessness in Organisations." *The Academy of Management Review* 26.4 (2001): 548–65.

The climate of progression and ascent to the top is naturalized and only a few resist the pressure. In the text by Rogier Creemers (2017)⁸, *A Machiavellian guide to getting ahead in academia*, the visual metaphor presented is revealing: a horse race accident, in which, in addition to speed, someone's accident is a step on the ladder for others, or, in this case, one less competitor. Just be attentive, never stop being vigilant. Being a good person or colleague is the least of the concerns.

The instrumentalization is the use of the Other when there is no longer time to satisfy this demand alone and continue as an oiled member of the gear – the Other is sometimes useful. We are witnessing a moral erosion of the relationships between academic professionals and increasingly complex and persuasive power structures. The human face of the research scholar fades into the face of students, who expect more from these professionals. More time, more availability, more empathy.

I find in this challenge comparison with the cultural, spiritual, and educational challenge in the Ecological Education and Spirituality field which, as Pope Francis says, will involve long processes of regeneration. Just as “the market tends to create a consumerist mechanism”, the capitalist paradigm of the academy of out-puts, speed, and neoliberal models of productivity tends to generate “self-referential individuals, who isolate themselves in their own consciousness and increase their voracity”⁹.

Thus, instead of cultivating values of integral human development, both in the individual and community dimensions, we are witnessing forms of moral degradation and collective selfishness.

"Everyone has seen the destructive power of monstrous academic egos - every department in every university can recount tales of legendary ego battles between academics" says Ryan Holiday, in the book *Ego is the Enemy* (2017)¹⁰.

Indeed. Still a freshman at the academy, once naïve, I wrote a text that reflected my view on managing the ego. Sounds like this:

*Managego*¹¹

Manaego is an endemic species of academia habitats whose prevalence is manifested mainly in the high season of conferences, lectures, and communications in general, as long as they have audience.

It lodges around the navel and feeds itself preferentially on more sensitive visceral states.

Given its functional profile on the ongoing growth of antibodies (in the face of proliferations of alien egos), it tends to wear out and consume its host- the scholar. Once inoculated, and unlike chickenpox, those who have already harbored a *Managego* are not immunized, on the contrary, they become progressively more dependent, hypersensitive

⁸ *A Machiavellian guide to getting ahead in academia*, available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/author/rogier-creemers>

⁹ Francisco, P. (2015). *Laudato Si'*: Segunda Carta encíclica do Sumo Pontífice Francisco: Sobre o Cuidado da Casa Comum. Paulus, Lisboa.

¹⁰ Holiday, R. (2017). *Ego is the Enemy- the fight to master your greatest opponent*. Profile Books.

¹¹ *Manage+ego= Managego* © 2022.Filipa Rodrigues. All rights reserved.

and susceptible, anticipating by far the appearance of acute situations that could give rise to *Manaego* reaction.

It appears that its prevalence in the host does not diminish the discomfort caused by each new surge of egos, on the contrary - there's no letting your guard down - it increases scholars' vigilance, preventing the emergence of new strains in each school year.

Despite the psychodigestive disorders that it can cause to host professionals, the need to protect the *Manaego* must be reinforced, since the predatory practices between egos have, lately, increasingly found fertile ground in Academia, leading to serious risk of serious conflicting scenarios and possible host destruction.

So, in case of abdominal discomfort, cherish your *Manaego* with a lot of art and poetry with calming effect, as it is part of you (more or less reactive) - at least until retirement age.



Figure 1: Francis Bacon: Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion (1944)¹²

A new conversion to Humanity¹³ in academic contexts is needed, the ethical imperative that sustains an ecological approach to humanity in a context where the values of care, respect and dignity are demanded from generations of students every day.

¹² Bacon, F. *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), Torrance Art Museum, available at <https://www.torranceartmuseum.com/staffpicks/2020/5/8/u17g04kykneduweufrvdtbab60jws6>

¹³ Jacquard, A. (1988). *A herança da liberdade: da animalidade a humanidade*. Martins Fontes.