

Reflections

Project management and research governance – towards a critical agenda beyond neoliberalization? – commentary to Refstie

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In this contribution to the debate that followed the publication of Hilde Refstie's timely and cogent *Reconfiguring research relevance*, I propose to take a closer look at the funding structures that bind academia and other institutional and private sector actors into networks of collaboration and research co-production often experienced as dysfunctional. In particular, I focus on competitive funding bids that distribute financial and labour resources by awarding short-term 'projects', with particular reference to European Union (EU) projects. Drawing on my current research work on the 'project economy', co-led with Nadine Hassouneh and funded by the KONE Foundation at Tampere University, I make two initial suggestions that expand on some of the points raised so far in the discussion hosted by *Fennia*. First, project-based research funding is a more politicized and coercive tool than we tend to think. Second, project management and project-based work, and the associated patterns of (gendered and racialized) precarization and even abuse, have a longer and more ingrained history than what we commonly identify as the 'neoliberalization' of academia. By way of conclusion, I highlight how scrutinizing the funding architectures that enable and constrain our work help us to explore the relation between research and policy, beyond the limits of critical categories such as 'neoliberalism'.

Keywords: EU projects, nudging, project management, neoliberalization

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It's December 2022, and I am sitting in front of my computer screen, attending a course offered by a Brussels-based consulting and training company on the planning and management of European Union-funded 'projects'. Beside the trainer, a grant writer with decades of experiences in helping organizations secure EU funding, sitting across my virtual Zoom desk are freelance project managers, non-governmental organizations staff working in fields spanning sustainable urban development and agriculture, and academics and university staff from countries including Finland, the Netherlands and Czech Republic. A glimpse into a European Union made of logical frameworks, stakeholder analyses and Excel spreadsheets, in which the boundaries between "being a research institution and

a consulting company”, as one of Hilde Refstie’s (2021, 165) interviewees put it, appear as blurred as ever. Everybody, across the public and private sectors, is dealing in the same tools. Everybody, and especially academics, is looking for ‘partners’ for their projects. Indeed, as I will soon find out, many of the participants are there to ‘reach out’ and ‘network’, more than for the content of the course.

This snapshot from my recent research reminds us of how much time and resources academics employ in designing and developing projects that, through competitive funding bids, allow us to maintain the essential conditions for our research work to take place: paid (if on a short-term and precarious basis) collaborators, equipment, travel budgets, time off teaching. Securing ‘partners’ beyond academia, thus enhancing the impact of research, is essential in this endeavour, and it is indeed a prerequisite for accessing funding from major state, supra-national and private donors. Such are the structures that bind us. We have no choice but entering the competition for funding. We have no choice but frantically looking for partners, as many of my fellow trainees in the course were doing. At stake are not only promotions and careers, but also, often, the very chance of staying in employment. Has this rendered research ‘collaboration’ and ‘co-production’ pointless buzzwords, empty performances we engage in to survive in a neoliberal academic environment? Can we still rescue research co-production, partnerships and policy-relevance from such fate? Far from being despondent, these questions, as Refstie (2021) shows, are urgent. The discussion she offers addressing them is precious in its courage and nuance.

Refstie (2021) details how emerging from her research is a picture of academics being ‘nudged’ in certain directions when it comes to designing research and forming partnerships. A term borrowed from behavioural economics, nudging refers here to “a form of “soft paternalism” that steers people in certain directions without taking away their full choice” (Refstie 2021, 164, see also Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Although the context is different from the one in which Refstie conducted her fieldwork, preliminary results from my research on EU projects have led me to question the limits of the word ‘nudging’. Perhaps the semblance of ‘full choice’ we are left with is merely ‘freedom to obey’, to say it with historian of management Johann Chapatot (2020)?

The violent politics of seemingly ‘technical’ EU project bureaucracies have been examined in detail in fields such as development, humanitarian aid and migration governance (for a recent example, see Welfens & Bonjour 2022, on the EU Trust Fund for Africa). While academics have been less keen on turning the gaze upon their own sector, Refstie’s (2021) piece highlights that such critical soul searching is sorely needed. This is particularly true in conditions, such as the ones examined in her study, where we are required to engage in fast, policy-relevant research, co-produced with non-academic partners, competing for funding through schemes that are far from those traditionally supporting essential, ‘blue-sky’ scientific research (if there was ever such a thing, that is).

We must stare directly at the power we are subject to, and EU funding is illuminating in this regard. In the training for EU projects management that I studied in my research, there was no mincing of words when it came to discussing the political nature of EU funding tools. Trainers were explicit about how studying closely to the EU Commission political priorities, incorporating not only their managerial tools, but also the nuances of their language, was essential to build successful applications. Many EU programs are criticized for the opacity that characterizes projects selection (Welfens & Bonjour 2022). Applicants, consultants and grant writers in training, I found, are often encouraged to develop their knowledge of Commission policies and politics as a way to work around this opacity, and survive in a ruthless market.

We can argue that, even in such an environment, people and organizations retain capacity for tactical agency. After all, the strategic behaviour EU project management trainees are encouraged to adopt in applications could be seen as an example of that – even though the words written in the application files, far from being mere deceptive tactics, have real material consequences. Academics too, we may claim, can ‘nudge back’ the powers that impose themselves through competitive funding tools marked by scarcity and obscurity. Yet, in today’s universities, can we go beyond that? Can we make research co-production critical and emancipatory, moving towards a more radical and disruptive politics of academic knowledge production? The answers to these questions in the *Fennia* debate range from Refstie’s (2021) nearly Gramscian ‘optimism of the will’, to more cautious, contextual positions (Häkli 2022; Lyytinen 2022).

My tentative suggestion is that, before beginning to answer those questions, we study more closely the managerial tools we are dealing with when it comes to research and university governance. As social scientists, we still know relatively little about them, and our familiarity with critical management literature remains scarce. As geographers, for instance, we tend to assume they are the product of processes of 'neoliberalization' – indeed Refstie's (2021) piece offers a focused and helpful review of these discussions. To be sure, since the late 1960s project bureaucracies have proliferated in previously state-dominated sectors, like international development, following the global spread of broader neoliberal restructuring (Freeman & Schuller 2021). Yet project management, Chapoutot's (2020) has shown, has been around for much longer. Indeed, it is one of the tools most intimately connecting modern liberal Europe to its authoritarian roots, with ideologies, technologies, and even actual people travelling seamlessly from the genocidal violence of World War II (WWII) to the edges of the stakeholder-value 'new economy' (*ibid.*).

While this may be a daunting realization, a lucid appraisal of the nature of modern liberal management can free us from "dispiriting" and "analytically limiting" discussions of neoliberalism (Lorne 2022, 82). In analyses of university governance in particular, an unspoken nostalgia for the imagined 'good old days' of intellectual freedom and job security often characterizes critiques of the so-called 'neoliberal turn' (Ahmed 2021). However, the modern university has incorporated elements of violent managerialism (if of a different, state-sanctioned kind), classist corporatism (often disguised as intellectual patronage, or even 'collegiality') and white heteropatriarchy well before the application of XXI century neoliberalising policies. The kinetic, embodied violence of these power structures has been borne by persons and bodies classified as non-white, non cis-male, non-heterosexual, non-middle class (*ibid.*). Crucially, these persons and bodies are also the ones who disproportionately engage in the daily labour that *de facto* reproduces universities, as discussed in Diana Vela-Almeida's (2022) commentary. This violent exploitation is resilient, to the point that it has often found in instrumental critiques of neoliberalism a convenient shield against accountability (as in the case of skepticism against diversity and equality or anti-harassment policies; Ahmed 2021). Engaging the history of project management in universities and research institutions offers one possible vantage point to understand a violence that is historically entrenched, and continues unabated.

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