Do Academics Dream of Polyphonic Sheep? Suggestions for Voice-Based Democratic Practice in the Humanities

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Those who dream of different worlds are often identified using strange attributes and names. For all I know, I might as well be a naïve, quixotic, privileged, ignorant, millennial unicorn, or a pseudo-anarchist who abides by the rules. As a doctoral student and research assistant without tenure, my designated role in German academia is to find acceptance in higher ranks: the non-professorial level is institutionally designed to be transient. If I were to step out of line, such as by suggesting a radical flattening of university hierarchies, the most harm I could do would be to my own career – and thus to the ability to spend time on what I am qualified to do instead of considering other abilities to exploit in order to make a living. Hence the task for this opinion essay is to be non-threatening, and yet to suggest why and how young Cultural Studies scholars should organise in an attempt to question academic tradition. A central observation led to the initial version of this text: that established academics in our field as well as junior scholars such as myself propagate anti-hegemonic value systems but hesitate to question their own authority as climbers in the university hierarchy. Hence the title of this essay alludes to a popular narrative about regulators who are tasked with apprehending the mechanisation of humanity but turn mechanic in this very effort: Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Rather than merely observing such hypocrisy, however, this essay is intended to be constructive in the sense of opening a conversation about how to practice what we preach. I thus expressly invite scholars of all walks of life to get in touch, to contradict or revise this text, and to collaborate.

There is nothing inherently wrong with vertical power as a source of institutional stability. In its best forms it is an accessory to horizontal structures and experimentation, examples of which can be observed in the open-source and free-culture movements (cf. Lessig 2004: 264, 279f). Yet both Western democracies and their universities are increasingly leaning in the direction of vertical stratification (cf. Lorenz 2012: 628), to the point where they *simulate* participation for the sake of *covering up* top-down management and hegemonic decision-making. Cultural Studies has an important role in calling out corporate influence, revealing instruments of power, and

questioning hegemonic ideologies such as neoliberalism. If it wants to remain a discipline that is not just moralising but political, however, it needs to once more challenge rather than satisfy a perceived consensus in the humanities around prescribing language use and representational practices. Instead, I suggest to actively experiment with and implement democratic practices in the communities we are part of. It is only through experiencing ideals such as horizontalism and participatory democracy that we can evaluate and potentially mainstream such practices instead of using them as comfortable but distant projection screens.

Democratic Practice

The term *democracy* here does not only refer to simulating choice through a pre-formulated vote, a process that has become typical in electoral democracies. This is exemplified by the use of referendums on the lesser of two evils, as was the case with the German rail construction project Stuttgart 21 (cf. Novy/Peters 2012: 140f). The decision was to either scrap it altogether after pouring tax money into it, or to spend more money in order to make it mildly appealing. *Whether* such a project was necessary and *how* it should be managed was never put to the electorate, leading to the lingering smell of legitimising a bad decision after the fact. The Leave campaign in the run-up to the UK's Brexit referendum can be similarly analysed as a strategy to shift the blame for inequality from a detached political elite in Britain to the EU as a supposed outside threat (cf. Hobolt/Tilley 2014: *passim*; Juncker 2017: n. pag.).[1]

Rather than limiting our notion of participation to yes/no decisions, other forms of democratic practice can and – in the face of a decreasing feeling of being represented in the political sphere[2] – need to be fostered. One such form which enjoys popularity among recent protest movements takes *voice* as its central logic. Voice-based practices aim to be more participatory than purely representation-based ones by involving everyone affected by a decision not just in reaching a conclusion but in framing the decision as well. Voice can be defined as providing an account of your own perspective and involvement in such a decision. If used as the inner logic of democratic decision-making, voice demands proponents to both *develop* their own account and *hear* the accounts of others (cf. Couldry 2010: 1-3; Butler 2005: 12). Although seemingly

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[1] There is irony in Jean-Claude Juncker (President of the European Commission) making this valid point, since the EU in its present form shows the same signs of detachment. Imposing austerity onto countries such as Greece provided an easy target for shifting blame, but it merely mirrored *national* common practice both in the UK and in Germany.

[2] National polls support this claim. In the US, for example, unfavourable opinions of both major political parties have increased dramatically from 6 per cent in 1994 to 24 per cent in 2018 (Pew Research Center 2018: 53). A similar trend can be observed in the UK where the lack of trust in the government has increased from 11 per cent in 1986 to 32 per cent in 2015 (Ormston/Curtice 2015: 135f).

referring only to utterances, voice as a concept also includes physical forms of expression such as taking to the streets.

Situations which honour voice as defined above feature room for both expressing oneself and acknowledging what others express in an effort to find ways of shaping a community together. Rather than treating the political sphere as a largely siloed sector or even a market, voice-based practices inherently treat the everyday as political by making all participants responsible for not denying voice. This means that those who wish to honour voice but who behave or feel differently are still to be welcomed to join in a shared conversation. The overall assumption in choosing voice as a central value is that participants have the capacity for and are willing to cooperate with one another. In this logic, polyphony serves as the model for an actionable consensus. It can be reached when multiple participants coordinate their expression to temporarily form a whole (cf. Holloway 2017: *passim*). Two metaphors commonly used to express this idea are performing in a choir together and replacing spectacle by festival – and thus erasing the dichotomy between spectator and spectacle as ciphers for electorate and political sphere (Derrida 1978: 244f).

Social movements such as Occupy or Nuit Debout demonstrate in their central assemblies that voice-based practices and polyphony are possible on the micro level.[3] Instead of the usual protest form, in which celebrity speakers use a stage and a microphone to speak *to* the protesters, protest assemblies provide a platform to speak *with* each other. Collaborative approaches include the 'human microphone' by means of which anyone can speak up and spoken words need to be collectively repeated by attendants in order to be heard by all (cf. Deseriis 2014: 44-46). Approval and discontent are expressed through clear body language, with those blocking an otherwise consensual decision needing to explain why their position should be taken into account. The ability of such assemblies to reach decisions illustrates that voice-based collaboration is not merely a figment. On the contrary, it offers a valuable alternative to dominance- or hegemony-based governance, provided that the group agrees on their interest to cooperate. Polyphony has the potential to actuate rather than just idealise group interaction which is *machtarm*, i.e. to accommodate both symmetrical and asymmetrical relations in constellations that imply as little vertical power as necessary. [4]

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[3] In this line of thinking representative democracy still has its place as a means of bringing together large numbers of voices. The practice is prone to wielding power, however, when delegation is based solely on space and majority as, for example, in the case of constituencies in British or German general elections.

[4] A potential solution to the need for political representation in large groups is fluid (or 'liquid') delegation. Delegating one's voice, however, must remain voluntary (Couldry 2010: 136f).

In the Humanities

If we use the concept of voice to look at Cultural Studies, the result is that our field employs the very workings of power which we criticise in others. While the discipline has adopted more inclusive notions of culture, institutionally it clings to bringing into prominence – and I sadly find myself quoting Matthew Arnold here – "the best which has been thought and said" (1869: viii). While this is accepted conventional wisdom in academia, the discipline's acceptance into the wider humanities has brought with it the canonisation of a set of scholars and their perspectives to the point that favouring and reproducing their positions has become more accepted than critical opposition. On the one hand, stratification comes with institutionalised education since it is based on the assumed difference in ability between the two subject positions *teacher* and *student*. On the other hand, the institutional strata we build do not inherently lend their representatives' voices greater importance. And yet the possible deconstruction of the teacher/student dichotomy or the knowledge of power relations in academia do not seem to yield any meaningful impetus for drawing lessons from this knowledge in the domain we have an immediate impact on: our own workplaces.

Take, for example, academic conferences. In their best forms the gatherings we organise have a low administrative and financial entry barrier, and they demonstrate an array of research questions and solutions that push towards the unconventional. They are not, however, spaces where we can reach convincing answers together, where ideas are exchanged democratically, or where work-in-progress is refined. Instead, they work to support a continued myth of social climbing by bringing together established and junior scholars to build up a career network. Annual association conferences such as the ESSE Conference or the German *Anglistentag*, for example, are opportunities to manage established friendships and work relationships, and to hone the individual success of those who both dare and are allowed to act on a professorial level. They are, however, also rituals of exclusion for those who are less advanced in their careers, who have priorities which clash with institutionalised career stages, or who are not attached to a university. The common attempt to alleviate this issue is to introduce postgraduate tracks. Such segregation, however, serves mainly to legitimise the exclusiveness of the higher echelons of academia by offering young scholars a chance to adapt to the supposedly high standards.

If Cultural Studies wants to take its criticism of hegemony as a perpetuated dominance managed through various forms of 'consensual' regulation seriously, then why do we not strive to do better? Our discipline could set an example by virtue of its openly political impetus within the humanities by employing polyphonic spaces. As in the case of the protest movements mentioned above, this necessitates an altered communicative situation. Instead of selecting 'important' voices in advance and having

individuals preach from the pulpit with little chance of immediate interaction, such spaces or events would focus on creating something together. Best practices from other fields include so-called developer sprints in open-source software development, which bring together distributed teams for a couple of days to advance a common product. Conferences are increasingly replaced by barcamps, unconferences, nonferences, or open-space conferences. These formats avoid keynotes and the focus on individual performance, and instead rely on self-organisation, the lack of predetermined outcomes, and the creativity of participants (cf. Owen 2008: 22-25).

Cultural Studies Barcamp

Imagine, for example, the following scenario. Instead of just another conference, we organise an open space for two to three days with a broadly defined topic. It is hosted at a university, but open to "whoever cares" (Owen 2008: 25) independent of status, skill set, or identity. The event's initial phase is used to get to know each other in order to identify available resources, skills, and interests. This leads to a daily ritual that sets off autonomous work groups: attendants are asked to generate project ideas, and to find collaborators by introducing their idea to the audience. The resulting groups are asked to rapidly prototype and iterate on their project. The day ends with an all-hands meeting during which progress and required further work are discussed. Apart from the topic, two main variables are left for the hosts to decide upon: money and target audience. Should the event's hosts have money at their disposal, it could be used to distribute travel grants instead of paying keynote speakers. Such grants could, for example, allow freelancers without university affiliation to participate. This would contribute to reinscribing universities as spaces of learning which contribute to the local community.

A more specific example might illustrate what such a Cultural Studies barcamp could look like. The organisers decide to focus on *Sense8* (2015-2018) as the event's overarching theme. The *Netflix* show was created by the Wachowskis, most widely known as the directors of *The Matrix*. It depicts a diverse group of eight people who suddenly learn to enter each other's minds across the globe – to the effect that they manage to both understand and enrich each other's frequently isolated lives in real time. The show thus portrays horizontal collaboration on the micro level: a theme which matches the barcamp format. The event begins in the evening by showing an episode or two in order to get the audience talking and find common ground.

Over the next two days the open-space technique outlined above is used to prototype several projects. One group might write a piece of fan fiction that fleshes out the show's normative, voice-denying villain Whispers, and publishes it on the web. Another group starts tagging an episode in a database as a means of developing a

fragmented-yet-polyphonic reading that represents *Sense8*'s portrayal of cultural, sexual, ethnic, and gender diversity. A third group could decide to work on a traditional journal article or video essay on the loneliness and connectedness that these trans-, bi-, homo-, a- and heterosexual characters experience. A fourth group decides to find answers to a more decidedly political question: why a scene in the show's Christmas special sets an aestheticised orgy against a Vietnam War-era song:

> Everywhere is freaks and hairies,
> Dykes and fairies, tell me where is sanity.
> Tax the rich, feed the poor
> Till there are no rich no more.
> I'd love to change the world,
> But I don't know what to do
> So I'll leave it up to you. ("Happy F*cking New Year" 2016: 0:50:59-52:31) [5]

The scene juxtaposes the visual breaking of inhibitions with a lyrical desire for political change. Taken out of context, the last line of the lyrics might suggest a subjugated attitude and reluctance to act. Both the orgy and the show's overall theme of interconnectedness, however, make clear that this juxtaposition signifies mutual reliance among the characters. They learn to think of themselves not only as individuals but also as members of a collective entity, and the loss of sexual inhibition expresses the protagonists' newfound ability to articulate and gratify one another's desires, i.e. to express themselves and listen to the voices of a small group of close individuals.

Conclusion

As the exemplary list of projects above shows, the hypothetical event outlined here might challenge the types of output we accept as academic. In discussing the barcamp format with fellow students and colleagues, an odd pattern has emerged: there is a general agreement that our discipline should keep criticising the institutional bounds within which it operates. Whenever I put the ideas to more experienced scholars, however, I am met with an admirable intention to help young scholars advance their careers – to the effect that such projects are seen as a distraction from 'proper' academic work. While efforts to guard Cultural Studies as an institutional discipline are understandable, career advancement has become *the* inhibitor in challenging academic tradition. If we want to truly dispute – not just in words but in practice – hegemonic beliefs such as that of the universal superiority of senior scholars or the canon of prestigious theorists and theories, we need to work on overcoming such inhibitions.

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[5]   The lyrics are taken from "I'd Love to Change the World (Matstubs Remix)" released in 2014 by English musician Jetta. The song is a cover of the original 1971 version by Ten Years After.

The foundations for an endeavour to establish democratic practice in academia could lie in the way we organise undergraduate and graduate education. Just like most common exam types and assignments imitate idealised scholarly practices such as reviewing, essay writing and disputing, our seminars and research trainings should include *desired* organisational forms and practices. Instead of further emphasising efficiency and individualisation, as is the case in the introduction of webinars and digital exams featuring one screen per student, we could organise and campaign for the recognition of collective efforts in exam regulations. Seminars could, for example, be organised around identifying a group's joint research questions, democratic decision making, reporting back to the group and rapidly forming hypotheses together. In this scenario, established perspectives in Cultural Studies inform and enrich the group's efforts. While such practices do run the risk of setting the stage for yet another form of metaphorically shouting louder than others, they also provide an opportunity to practice both listening to and developing voice. The result could be shared texts and products agreed upon by the participants.

Formats such as barcamps and collective seminars could help to refocus our work on ideas and participation in the academic community. In addition, they would allow students and scholars alike to experience not just individual but also collective achievements. These organisational forms demand rapid prototyping, which might, in fact, prove useful in securing the institutional future of our discipline in university landscapes biased by economic ideology. Cooperation could help us, for example, to make progress towards using digital technologies in order to render the transfer from source media into written text obsolete, to bridge gaps between amateurism and professionalism, or even to fuel experimental Cultural Studies in addition to established methodology. After all, why should we not begin to create the practices and tools we think would benefit the scientific community? Why should the humanities swing the pendulum towards increased competition rather than towards becoming a resource that enriches lives? Why should we abandon our field's roots in adult education only to perpetuate institutional stratification? At the very least this brief essay is a call to fellow minds in the humanities: with little to lose in terms of job security, let us positively offend people by getting together, and by setting real-life examples of what we imagine more radical democratic practices to look like.

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