

# Antipode

**Responses to the Participatory Geographies Research Group's 'Communifesto for Fuller Geographies: Towards Mutual Security', September 2012**

## **From Café Communism to Bureaucratic Aikido**

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We respond to the Communifesto from two ends of the academic tenure spectrum. One (Iain) has been a full professor for well over a decade; the other (Michael) a post-doctoral fellow looking at the post- contract academic labour market. These positionalities certainly inform our response.

*Iain*

Let me begin by observing that I agree with the three core tenets that precipitated this intervention by the Participatory Geographies Research Group (PyGyRG):

[i] Yes, we do live in a world that needs careful critical attention to crises of inequality and environmental calamity and geographers can contribute usefully to that;

[ii] Yes, geography and other 'critical' disciplines are being dismantled and reorganised in neoliberalising universities. I say this as someone who is currently employed in a School of the Environment (formerly a Department of Geography) and who is moving shortly from a position as Professor of Human Geography to take up a role in Environmental Planning;

And [iii] yes, as scholars, we need to give serious attention to supporting, reproducing, and tending to ourselves.

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And so I read the Communifesto with interest...that turned quickly to dismay. What leapt out at me from the document's introduction was the surprising and, I presume unwitting, selfishness that seemed to permeate the ambitions of this intervention. While the somewhat anonymous PyGyRG authors claim to be committed to working with communities and students, I was jarred in my initial reading of the call for participation by apparently self-centred queries about what "we ... are doing to ourselves and others"; "what the academy is doing to us" as we struggle to do good works; and "have fulfilling lives beyond the academy". It was only in subsequent review that matters such as the emphasis on moving against precarious employment relations, challenging separate teaching and research career tracks, and preserving the relevance of geography as an academic discipline became more apparent. A similar disjuncture struck me in the title's reference to mutual security. I mistakenly presumed this meant the security that arises from relationships of mutual respect and regard associated with the conduct of good participatory geography (see Fals-Borda and Anisur Rahman 1991). Instead, the mutuality emphasised here is that between geographers apparently seeking to preserve their 'academic tribe' (Becher and Trowler 2001) and lifestyles.

So, while as a geographer I agree, somewhat self-interestedly, with the foundations of this intervention, I find myself at issue with the ways in which they are presented and justified. And on the basis of a few years recently working nationally with political, academic and broader communities trying to make a case for geography, I am much more sensitive now to the widespread lack of awareness of our work as geographers, to the significance of the discourses we deploy to represent our mission, and to the cut-throat tribalism (or 'nationalism' [Rust, in Trowler 2011]) that continues to pervade academic circles. So, if you'll forgive me, I'd like to suggest a few vital 'editorial' changes to the Communifesto which together might also be regarded as tactics in our resistance.

It strikes me this manifesto needs a careful preface that makes clear the particular value that a (critical) geographical perspective brings and why a program of mutual support is required. What unique qualities can we geographers bring to the resolution of significant environmental and human problems? Just what is geography and what is it about it that will allow us to secure both relevance and future? As a political tool, a succinct preface of this

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sort offers vital ammunition in any resistance (however doomed to failure that might be...) we can offer against neoliberalising universities. Moreover, failure to do this leaves a document that smacks of pure self-interest.

Second, ahead of its Strategies and Tactics, the Communifesto needs a clear set of objectives. Precisely what are our ambitions in developing such a document? If I might employ a metaphor from strategic planning: the document currently reads like a strategic plan *without* objectives. I trust you will forgive me this lapse into technocratic terminology (see Watson 2004). Perhaps I have already spent too long within the circles of 'management' in neoliberalising universities.

I am less than happy with the title too. As I noted at the outset, I have no fundamental objection to the ambitions of the Communifesto, but really let us step away from middle-class, café communism and find a title that calls this document for what it is: a timely and useful but self-interested cry for resistance, relevance and mutual support.

*Michael*

As an early career researcher, what initially strikes me about the Communifesto is its relevance. These are troubling times for the humanist vision of the university as a space of intellectual freedom. Each reader will have their own lament. I have two observations regarding neoliberalising universities' rampant managerialism, benchmarking, and KPIs. The first is that incessant form filling, meeting attendance, and 'up skilling' sessions dissipate quality reading-, thinking-, and writing-time. The second is the perversities of such managerialism. It appropriates time that could be spent producing academic outputs, *i.e.* KPIs. One ends up attending meetings to be told you aren't publishing enough.

The Communifesto also invites critical geographers and fellow travellers to share knowledge about life inside the neoliberalising university. I am a post-structural sociologist in a (hyper) positivist School of the Environment where geography faces an uncertain future. It appears that impending staff movements and retirements will see geography all but erased from the curriculum as the university moves towards new market driven qualifications: social work, environmental management, and 'international studies'. Interdisciplinary approaches have been the wedge to collapse the disciplines and direct researchers towards 'policy

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relevance'. Therefore, rather than develop critical knowledge to disentangle the 'webs of significance' in which the university and students are now spun (Geertz 1973: 5), academics are brought into the creation of more streamlined policy performativities (Lyotard 1979: 11).

These points lead to the Communifesto's tactics. As Larner (2003) has suggested, academics need to find new dispositions towards the neoliberalising university - to sit lightly in the saddle of academic production. Perhaps then we need to take inspiration from 'everyday resistances' identified by peasant studies (Scott 1985). One peasant tactic when refusing extraction demands is to say 'yes' when you mean 'no'. So rather than confront university bureaucracies head-on we develop forms of cognitive and behavioural Aikido which takes the force of the neoliberalising university somewhere it never intended to go. Here is where academics could learn from the student community for they appear more advanced in their resistance to the neoliberalising university through feet dragging, feigned incompetence, and the subverting of priorities. Such an approach might appear 'unprofessional', but if academics are to reassert the moral economy of knowledge production a first step might be to deliberately confuse the metrics by which we are governed.

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