

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

'Tim-adical' Action: A Reply to Culum Canally

The SIGJ2 Writing Collective¹

We appreciate Culum Canally making the effort to engage with the ideas we presented in our recent *Antipode* intervention, ['What can we do? The challenge of being new academics in neoliberal universities'](#).

At the start we want to emphasize that we pretty much agree with everything Culum writes in his response, especially his comment about teaching or student engagement – we hold our hands up on this one, we dropped the ball and did not discuss student solidarity movements in our call to challenge neoliberal ascendancy in the academy. Perhaps one reason for this is because we were (and still are) a pretty diverse group of people, from early-ish PhD students through temporary and contractual researchers, post-docs and teaching staff to more privileged, secure and tenure-track lecturers and assistant professors. So, some of us at the time of writing did not have teaching positions and in fact were still students ourselves involved in the very student movements referenced. Nevertheless, we agree with the importance of working *with* students and student movements. Those of us who are teaching seek to engage students politically, to raise consciousness and solidarity in reclaiming university spaces at all levels.

Where we disagree with Culum is when he suggests that we should not feel insecure about our careers. These straightened times have meant that many of us (and many others beside) are very much concerned with our precarious and insecure positions in the academy (and elsewhere). It is not just a feeling nor is it “a vain effort to preserve our careers”, as Culum implies. Several of us and many others now have unpleasant experiences with departmental closures, hiring freezes, shrinking job opportunities, increased hiring-committee expectations, ‘restructuring’ to mask

dismissing faculty who do not meet ‘appropriate’ performance criteria, and so on. This concern with our careers, which could be characterized as careerism like Culum suggests, may not be radical and may indeed be a sign of timidity, but our piece was as much about offering deliberately modest proposals to illustrate the simple actions we can all take to change our universities without sacrificing ourselves into the bargain.

Moreover, since many of us were not (and still aren't) in tenure-stream jobs our material and immediate situations have very real implications for our ability to afford next month's rent, to be able to feed ourselves and our children, and indeed to have a means to support ourselves as we wait to see if we will have a source of income each semester. These concerns are not simple careerism, but speak to the incredibly uneven effects of the neoliberal academy as it materially affects many who seek entry into it, especially those of us who are precariously positioned in a hierarchical system that masks inequality as merit. Culum, therefore, makes an unfair assessment that rests on an assumption that the Collective which contributed to and wrote the original piece were and are all nicely positioned academic subjects with tenure-stream jobs. Quite the contrary. With this in mind, it is deeply unfortunate that even the modest and timid actions we presented are often not taken, by radicals or ‘tim-adicals’ alike. In other words, we agree it is not a time to “pussyfoot around”, but how we encourage even our proposed modest actions is as important as storming the walls of the neoliberal university.

With all that in mind, we think that Culum's response is perhaps written at cross-purposes to our own intervention and thus can be read as more complementary rather than an outright rejection of our suggestions. Why do we think this? To start with, Culum says he does not disagree “with their [our] intentions” and that he is not “picking on the group over semantics”. But we think this is precisely what he has done when it comes to main criticisms he lays at our door. We don't disagree with what Culum identifies as important issues, critical for us all as academics to address, young and old alike (for example, solidarity). However, we think he has turned his critical eye on us for the wrong reasons, and here's why...

Although Culum claims not to disagree with our intentions or want to nitpick over semantics, his response is largely concerned with identifying universities as structurally neoliberal, corporate

and/or right-wing. These different terms, which Culum largely uses interchangeably, are important to consider. We don't disagree that universities are being neoliberalized. And by this we take him to mean that markets and market forces like competition are being inserted in university life – sometimes surreptitiously, sometimes brutally, but usually in simple, everyday ways. What Culum argues is that we need to “strike at the roots of neoliberalism in the academy” and “positively alter the structure of the institution”. This is a clear example of where we are talking at cross-purposes (an all too common occurrence on the Left it seems) in that we consider – analytically – neoliberalism to always be in a process of becoming.

This means we need to change the *process* and not simply change structures or strike at particular institutional forms. In our case, we think we can change the process by highlighting how academics come to embody neoliberal values like competition and how we might overcome these values before we embody them ourselves or fight them if we do already embody them. Hence why we argue that we need to rethink our own practices and not simply focus on the (neoliberal) structures of the university. Doing the latter would do nothing to change the increasing competition we not only face but also embody as we seek to publish, to find grants, to apply for jobs, to secure tenure, *etc.* We have to acknowledge that we are competing on all these fronts with each other and against each other, that some of us will come out as 'winners' in this process precisely because some of us will 'lose'.

We can't deny that we operate within neoliberal constraints on a daily basis. For the most part, we have sought academic careers precisely because we are passionate about learning, about encouraging others (students and colleagues) to learn, to be political, to create opportunities to make change and envision alternative futures. To admonish us that “students shouldn't be ignored, infantilised, or treated as an encumbrance” is perhaps overstating the point and suggestive of an over-wrought reaction to our argument. While we recognise the opportunities academia offers, perhaps more so than many other professions, the university environment has changed significantly over the last 30 years. There is little question that the ‘academic’ is shaped and disciplined by neoliberal forms of governmentality – and this begins with creating the vulnerable early career academic subject. Our call was in part to recognise this precarity, and yet

find ways to subvert it, to empower ourselves and to resist embodying that which we find deeply problematic.

Culum commends us on our intent and our passive resistance to the “tyranny of ‘standardisation’” – our second point. Yet he ultimately condemns us for recognising the material effects of “how the neoliberal discourse limits [...] acceptable actions” and “tempers the actions and thoughts of aspiring radical academics”. It comes back to the question of what is acceptable action – not acceptable to the variously neoliberal institutions in which we find ourselves in everyday struggle, but acceptable to us as emerging academic subjects shaped by and disciplined by these structures, but who nevertheless seek to contest and subvert them. Are we fearful? Perhaps, but our intervention is not motivated by fear; it’s motivated by a material recognition of the increasingly constrained spaces in which new academics work and the need for solidarity and action, however small. If we were too shy we would not be seeking to contest the shaping effects of neoliberalization at all. The tone of Culum’s critique does not do much to demonstrate the kind of solidarity we seek and perhaps falls back into debates on what is ‘radical’ which have been thrashed out amongst leftist geographers for some time. We do not want to perpetuate this debate here, but would argue that what is considered radical shifts its terms of reference; that there are many ways to be radical. Whether radical or not, the suggestions we made are efforts to subvert neoliberalism's hold on us as new researchers, teachers, and fully engaged, politicised scholars. They are meant to encourage others to do likewise in solidarity and while cognisant of the variety of precarious situations we find ourselves in.

Endnote

¹ The following people contributed directly to the writing of this reply (listed alphabetically) : Kean Birch (corresponding author: kean@yorku.ca), Sophie Bond, Jean Paul Catungal, Tina Harris, Dawn Hoogeveen, Nicole Laliberte, and Marit Rosol. The response builds on an intervention written with further contributions from the following people (listed alphabetically again): Melinda Alexander, Jason Beery, Nathan Clough, Sean Gillon, Vanessa Lamb, Kyja Noack-Lundberg, Nina Martin, Andre Pusey, and Omar Salamanca.

