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MEDITATION

Anthropology inside out

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Response to comments on "Academic precarity as hierarchical dependence in the Max Planck Society" by Vita Peacock, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2016.

Our discipline has always required great care. Balancing one's ethical duties to research participants and colleagues, to readers, reviewers, and editors, and now with open access to the general public—while striving for an intellectual honesty above all—presents us with no simple task. The intimacy of doing the anthropology of institutions in Europe as an anthropologist in a European institution just makes these duties of care more visible and pronounced. For this reason the article's moral ambivalence is vital. It is as necessary to do justice to a Teutonic relation as it is to represent its potential for injustice. Whether it succeeds is another matter. One interesting effect of this ambivalence since the article's publication earlier this year however, has been to produce very different inferences in the minds of its readers. Such diversity is well reflected in the considered responses from Julie Billaud, Cris Shore, and Christoph Brumann.

Billaud enriches the debate with a comparative ethnographic think piece on the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. In the process she explores her own "overwhelming feeling of boredom"—a move that may dismay my interlocutors in the natural sciences who perpetually stressed the importance of "excitement." An Institute saturated with boredom is quite against the Society's own self-image. Billaud defends her desire for enchantment against what might be considered a "naive and utopian vision," but in fact she would be in good company elsewhere in the Society. Scientists I knew echoed her citation of Bateson, telling me their work consisted of "playing around." So yes, my interlocutors may be dismayed; on the other hand, they would not be surprised. While the directors I worked with were generally popular, there were always veiled references to when "the system does not

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work," to other Institutes where the directors narrowed the autonomy of their scientists and hierarchy segued into control. (This is of course implicit in Axel's claim that the director "could be a king if he wanted to.") While the affect of boredom she explores is counter-cultural in one sense, in Billaud's ethnography it still remains the outcome of personalized leadership—a value that consistently out-trumps any other.

What we might also glean from Billaud's brave offering is that our moral critiques are misplaced. Social theory in the wake of '68 has been consistent in its attack on the legitimacy of hierarchical relations (Peacock 2015), yet it is not hierarchy as such that produces Billaud's affects of constraint. It is the way a hierarchical relation is translated into the exertion of control through bureaucratic technologies; as in one sense or another, all of her examples concern the allocation of resources. The fact is that egalitarian systems can execute the same translation. Shore's perspicacious comparison between directors and "project barons" is salient here because it is through the exertion of resource control that directorship begins to adopt characteristics of neoliberal governmentality. Billaud's "experience of stuckedness" echoes the hollowing delay that audit culture produces: one in which the charisma of the present is perpetually put on hold in service to some future imperative. Just publish a book and you will have financial security. Just win a grant and you will be promoted. Sometimes these imperatives are so deafening that we can scarcely hear what each other is substantively saying. If something quasi-feudal can so closely resemble something neoliberal, then the moral issue at stake is not one of how to organize people but of these bureaucratic techniques that make a bland mask for domination.

In contrast to Billaud's concern with affect, Shore's lucid commentary takes an economistic view. For Shore, dependence is equivalent to "a disguised form of class relationship": in which "structural violence" produces an "underclass of subaltern researchers." He then poses the important question as to whether the neoliberalization of academia is entrenching these asymmetries—particularly through the project barons commanding large public sums. Shore's scholarly suggestion is to resituate the argument within a 1960s literature on patron-client relations: with dependence negotiated by its incumbents as "a calculated exchange relationship and investment strategy."

While I appreciate the ethnography can be read in this way, I hesitate to follow this kind of economic thinking. Indeed the article as a whole and the thesis from which it is drawn position themselves as arguments against it. At its base the language of class suggests two groups in opposing relations to the means of production, with different personal access to its resources and the perennial threat of conflict. The picture in the MPS is not this. Directors are of course scientists themselves, a sameness that softens their hierarchical difference. Similarly, both are salaried workers on pay scales not wildly dissimilar (certainly nothing like the differentials between professors and university provosts). Intrahierarchical conflict is also very muted. It could be, as Brumann proposes, that all parties are simply "used to" the norms of dependence. Yet my ethnography would suggest that when people are suspended in a relation of complementarity this robust, it can make the rupture that political action requires very difficult. The most viable option, as evidenced by Benjamin (and indeed Billaud it would seem), is to "exit" the organization

completely (Hirschman 1970): one clearly assisted by the precariatization of its workforce. These are not then class antagonisms but something much more sinewed. Shore's analogy with priesthood, mayoralty, and so on is highly apposite but not in the way they were analyzed in the 1960s. The problem with patron-client literature was always its transactionalism (cf. Piliavsky 2014). Social encounters start looking uncannily like the commodity-form, with their historicity lost and the desires that surround them instrumentalized. Faris is strategic but he is not instrumental; the difference is subtle but important.

Shore is right to raise the question of gender. The demographics of directorship are overwhelmingly androcentric. At the time of research in 2011 there were just 22 female directors out of a total of 286, with an even smaller ratio in the hard sciences I studied. Moreover, the Society's statutes fail to problematize the use of "he" as a gender-neutral term. Yet the fact that there *are* female directors complicates the issue. The directorship was not (as it was among many varieties of technical staff) an exclusively homosocial position. Having not worked with any female director, I was not positioned to draw conclusions on gender and directorship. Clearly the issue of gender requires further research. For now I will leave these conclusions to a female senior social scientist inside the MPS, who reflected on a comparison I once made between directors and big-men and -women: "I am afraid it is about big men even where (big) women are concerned," she demurred.

Finally, I must address the commentary of Brumann, who is also a permanent Max Planck employee. As with Billaud, Brumann offers an alternative analysis predicated on the deep knowledge of the insider. He adds important details on German labor law and the impact of some of the media coverage cited in the article on the MPS itself. It is encouraging to see this insider accept unhesitatingly two major struts of the argument, namely that "autonomy builds on precarity" and that dependency within the Max Planck Society is not a specifically "neoliberal product." Brumann goes even further than my own claims to suggest that the article "explains part of a much broader phenomenon of academic precarity." Nonetheless, this final remark is also the critique that gives his commentary its overall shape.

Brumann states that the argument "isolates and rarefies" the Max Planck Society too much, denying its significant historical and contemporary overlaps with the university system. Yet through such assertions Brumann is pursuing a syllogistic fallacy: specifically, one drawing a negative conclusion from an affirmative premise. Brumann is extrapolating my statements *on* the Max Planck Society to infer that these statements apply to *only* the Max Planck Society. Indeed, this is belied by the very first footnote (which he cites explicitly), as well as my extensive appeal to Fritz Ringer. Intriguingly, Brumann follows the same fallacy in his comments around the *Betriebsrat*. At no point in the article do I suggest that the *Betriebsrat* is singular to the Max Planck Society, nor its own "invention." An interesting question comes next—why would Brumann make this errors of logic? Here I would suggest the surging spirit of the organization is at work. For its sense of its own exceptionalism—interpellated in the discourses of autonomy and excellence—occupies the very heart of the organization's collective identity. When Brumann asserts that the essay "isolates and rarefies," he is ventriloquizing the Society's own vision of itself as isolated and rarefied. When he claims I consider the *Betriebsrat* a

Max Planck invention, he conveys the Society's conviction of its own inventiveness. This notwithstanding, I welcome Brumann's demonstrations of the porosity of this hierarchical form with other German institutions. This is precisely the broader resonance that I had hoped others might pursue. As with any work of scholarship, the validity of my conclusions extends only as far as the empirical ground they cover.

There are further points at which Brumann follows the ratiocinations of his colleagues. It is a commonplace within the organization that the Max Planck Society endures because it generates "results." This is clearly echoed in Brumann's claim that "the output in terms of publications, Nobel Prizes, ERC Advanced Grants, and the like has so far prevented German lawmakers and taxpayers from questioning the model." That this were true! British Universities once won around a quarter of all ERC funding (Jump 2015), yet that did not prevent lawmakers from questioning the model. The Max Planck Society endures because it realizes key values articulated during the German counter-Enlightenment, which so far have been successfully modernized. Only when these recalibrations lose their internal and external coherence will the organization fail or change significantly.

Before concluding I must highlight a point of contention and flat inaccuracy in Brumann's response. He quite rightly notes that the direct translation of *Betriebsrat* is "works council," yet the concept does not translate this easily for non-Germans. The function of the *Betriebsrat*—as one of their number informed me—is to "represent the interests of employees" and act as a "counterweight to the management." This largely consists of mediating personal disputes and ensuring that the labor laws Brumann discusses are adhered to. For employees in other countries, unions would perform these tasks. One of the major differences is that a *Betriebsrat* cannot call a strike. What is lost in translation is however obviated by retaining the original German; I then leave it to polyglot readers to translate the term their own way. Finally, I cannot claim the credit Brumann proffers for the "suggestive metaphor" of the stranger-king; that belongs to Marshall Sahlins.

I would sincerely like to thank all three readers for contributing to this debate, as well as Giovanni Da Col for initiating it. While performing our duties of care to diverse others, we must not then forget to attend to ourselves and our own rights as scholars to Billaud's "surprise, poetic imagination, enchantment or puzzlement."

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